

"ACROSS THE TWILIGHT WAVE": A STUDY
OF MEANING, STRUCTURE, AND
TECHNIQUE IN MEREDITH'S
MODERN LOVE

By

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

George Meredith's Modern Love was first published in London in 1862 as the title poem of Meredith's second volume of poetry: Modern Love and Poems of the English Roadside: With Poems and Ballads. Since that time, besides inclusion in volumes of Meredith's "complete" poetical works,¹ it has appeared once in Modern Love: A Reprint; To which is added The Sage Enamoured and the Honest Lady (London and New York, 1892); twice in "selections" of Meredith's poetry: Selected Poetical Works of George Meredith, Edited by G. M. Trevelyan (London, 1955), and Selected Poems of George Meredith, Edited with an introduction by Graham Hough (London, 1962); and four times in editions devoted solely to it: Modern Love, with Foreword by E. Cavazza (Portland, Maine, [1891]); Modern Love, with an introduction by Richard Le Gallienne (New York, 1909); L'Amour Moderne: Poème traduit de l'Anglais par André Fontainas (Paris, 1920); and Modern

¹The accepted text for Meredith's "complete" poetical works is The Poetical Works of George Meredith, With Some Notes by G. M. Trevelyan (London, 1912). M. B. Forman, in A Bibliography of the Writings in Prose and Verse of George Meredith (Edinburgh, 1922), lists also four "collected" editions of Meredith's works--[The Edition de Luxe, 1896-1912]; [The Library Edition, 1897-1910]; [The Pocket Edition, 1901-1906]; and [The Memorial Edition, 1909-1911]--all of which apparently contain volumes of the poems. The Trevelyan 1912 volume, however, supersedes all of these.

Love, with an introduction by C. Day Lewis (London, 1948).² In addition, it has appeared in numerous general anthologies and, with the one exception of "Lucifer in Starlight," is the most frequently anthologized, either in part or in whole, of any of Meredith's poetical works. Almost universally recognized as Meredith's most significant poetical work, it has undoubtedly received the greatest total volume of criticism and analysis of any of his poems, attracting the praise and attention of a long list of critics and men of letters in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries--including Algernon Charles Swinburne, Arthur Symonds, Edward Dowden, Sir William Watson, Richard Le Gallienne, G. M. Trevelyan, Arthur Clutton-Brock, J. B. Priestley, E. K. Chambers, C. Day Lewis, Siegfried Sassoon, Lionel Stevenson, and Norman Friedman,³ just to mention some of the better known figures who have dealt with the poem. Meredith himself also reported, in separate letters to his friend Maxse, that

²All of the above works, plus The Poetical Works of George Meredith (mentioned in the first footnote), are listed in the Bibliography under the editions of Meredith. However, any references to the various 'Introductions,' 'Forewords,' and 'Notes' to these works will be cited hereafter in footnotes according to the last name of the author of such 'Introduction,' 'Foreword,' or 'Notes,' with additional information given only if the author has other works cited in this study--e.g., Hough, p. ____; Cavazza, p. ____; or Trevelyan, "Notes," The Poetical Works, p. _____. As an added guide, any of these authors who are cited in footnotes will be listed in the Bibliography in their own right with a note: "See entry under the editions of Meredith."

³For references to the commentaries of these critics, see the Bibliography; the listing here is roughly chronological, according to the dates of publication of the commentaries. Inclusion in (or exclusion from) this list is not intended as an indication of the amount or quality of critical analysis of Modern Love itself; it is simply intended as an indication of interest in the poem shown by writers generally well known in areas other than Meredith criticism. A more comprehensive review of Modern Love scholarship may be found in Chapter II.

Modern Love had received the commendation of D. G. Rossetti and Robert Browning;⁴ Arthur Symons reports it to have been greatly admired by James Thomson;⁵ and Siegfried Sassoon reports it to have been a "perennial favourite" of T. H. Huxley.⁶

And yet, despite the relatively wide circulation it has received, and the relatively large amount of critical interest it has attracted, Modern Love has never been really thoroughly explicated, and--perhaps because of the difficulty of explication--has received almost no detailed analysis and evaluation of such important technical elements as its dramatic structure; the structure afforded by its seasonal imagery; the highly complex structure of its point of view; or even the prosodic structure of its stanza form.

The purpose of this dissertation will be, then, to present (1) a survey of the previous analytical work done on Modern Love, together with a discussion of its limitations; (2) an extended and relatively exhaustive stanza-by-stanza (and sometimes image-by-image) explication of the poem--together with a running commentary on the technical devices within each stanza, and on the relationship of the imagery and thought of one stanza to that of another and to that of Meredith's poetry and philosophy in general; (3) an analysis and evaluation of its dramatic structure, together with an analysis of the structural elements of seasonal imagery and point

⁴Letters of George Meredith: Collected and Edited by His Son, 2 vols. (New York, 1912), I, 57 and 73, hereafter cited as Letters.

⁵"George Meredith's Poetry," Westminster Review, CXXVIII (September 1887), 696.

⁶Meredith (New York, 1948), p. 51.

of view; (4) a brief analysis of the peculiarities and artistic merits of its stanza form; and (5) an evaluation of the literary merits and the historical significance of the poem as a whole.

In this final section, I shall demonstrate that although Modern Love is widely recognized as Meredith's most significant poetical work and that although it has been highly praised in an absolute sense, its general rank and significance as a continuous narrative-dramatic poem has never been well-established. I shall further propose that the over-all literary reputation of Modern Love has perhaps suffered by the very lack of major literary works with which it can be meaningfully compared--that it has been very inaccurately and inadequately defined as a sonnet sequence and that it stands, in fact, largely alone as a literary type. I shall also suggest that in technique, as well as in thought, it is still an intensely modern poem, and that although its techniques have not been widely imitated in the twentieth century, its peculiar lyric-dramatic point of view and its intricate symbolic-ironic patterning of imagery may yet offer a significant model for extended psychological-dramatic narratives in verse.

CHAPTER II

A SURVEY AND ANALYSIS OF PREVIOUS CRITICISM

The previous commentary on Modern Love falls almost entirely into the categories of summary and general critical evaluation rather than of specialized technical analysis. The exceptions to this are two articles on the image patterns--Norman Friedman's "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love"¹ and Elizabeth Cox Wright's "The Significance of the Image Patterns in Meredith's Modern Love"²--and one article by William T. Going on a possible autobiographical source for one of the secondary characters in the poem: "A Note on 'My Lady' of Modern Love."³ The Friedman article I shall discuss at length later, and the other two I shall refer to more briefly.

Other than these specialized articles, the previous commentary has appeared in the form of reviews; of introductions to editions of the poem, and notes thereto; of chapters or passages dealing with the poem in larger books or articles devoted to Meredith's life, work, and/or thought in general; and of essays devoted more or less exclusively to the poem, but

¹MLQ, XVIII (March 1957), 9-26, hereafter cited as "The Jangled Harp."

²The Victorian Newsletter, Number 13 (Spring 1958), pp. 1-9.

³MLQ, VII (September 1946), 311-314.

still of a very general nature. All of this "general" commentary has been of great value in establishing the poem's literary reputation--in proclaiming the vigor and power of its observation, the vividness of its metaphors, the range and depth of its psychological insight, and frequently the obscurity and difficulty which its story presents. But the contribution to the understanding of the major technical problems of the poem is scattered and piecemeal in all of this commentary, and indeed the strictly interpretive value of all of these general studies is rather limited. Although the larger portion of most of these commentaries is devoted to quotation, summary, and explication of the story and of the philosophical and psychological significance of the poem, one does not come out of a reading of this whole body of material with a complete picture even of the "objective" incidents and setting of the poem, and one certainly does not come out with a clear enough idea of its philosophical and psychological turning points to be able to construct a "logical" conception of its dramatic form.

The first relatively lengthy "synopsis" or summary of the action of Modern Love was provided by Richard Le Gallienne in his George Meredith: Some Characteristics (London, 1890). But Le Gallienne's synopsis is little more than quotation and the vaguest kind of summary and paraphrasing. Only very seldom does he really clarify an image or line or passage and his summary does not make explicit even the major "objective" turning points in the dramatic action, much less the psychological phenomena which make these objective incidents significant.

A briefer summary than Le Gallienne's, but really a more detailed one, because it is true summary and not for the most part merely undigested quotation, was provided by E. Cavazza in his "Foreword" to the

1891 edition of Modern Love, previously mentioned. Cavazza's summary, and indeed his whole "Foreword," is in many ways admirable. His larger generalizations as to the psychological directions of the poem are quite perceptive and his brief summary frequently shows sensitiveness to peculiar turns of phrasing. But Cavazza himself says of the poem that

The sonnets are so subtle and charged with secondary and often vague meanings, which are rather the stimulus to thought than its articulate expression, that a precise interpretation is hardly to be attempted.

And he goes on to describe his own summary as "a few general outlines" which he hopes "may be a sufficient guide to the reader."⁴ Despite the general value of Cavazza's "Foreword," it is just such a "precise interpretation" of "secondary" or double levels of meaning as Cavazza here despairs of which is essential to an understanding of the exact psychological relationships on which the dramatic structure of Modern Love turns.

The next relatively lengthy synopsis of the action of Modern Love appeared in 1906 in G. M. Trevelyan's The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith. Trevelyan's summary--which he himself characterizes as a "rough outline" and "broken quotations"⁵--adds some few new interpretative rephrasings of passages but tends on the whole to be less detailed and perceptive than Cavazza's.

Of considerably more value than his summary in the 1906 book is the set of "Notes" which Trevelyan supplied to "Modern Love" (as well as to other poems) in the 1912 edition of The Poetical Works of George

⁴Cavazza, p. vi.

⁵London, 1906, p. 34, hereafter cited as Poetry and Philosophy.

Meredith, previously cited. These notes--referring to separate items in somewhat more than half of the fifty stanzas--provide a relatively complete identification of speakers or characters spoken of in the various stanzas; an identification of a number of the classical allusions; some identification of objects referred to; an identification of most of the "objective" actions in the poem; some cross-reference to images and incidents from stanza to stanza; and explications of a fair number of somewhat obscure syntactical constructions. Trevelyan's notes also contain occasional interpretations of the philosophical gist of a given stanza or passage, but these interpretations are by no means complete enough or accurate enough to add up to a philosophical pattern by which the poem as a whole might be understood.

In between the publication of Trevelyan's The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith and the publication of his "Notes" to The Poetical Works, M. Sturge Henderson, in her George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer (London, 1907),⁶ provided the first, and what is probably still the most detailed published,⁷ stanza-by-stanza summary of the poem. Like Cavazza's commentary, Mrs. Henderson's summary is in many ways admirable, but it still only puts into paraphrase the more obvious "objective" actions of the poem and the more obvious emotions expressed. It does not indicate clearly the chief turning points in the structure

⁶According to Lionel Stevenson in "The Later Victorian Poets," The Victorian Poets, ed. Frederic E. Faverty (Cambridge, Mass., 1956), pp. 234-235, four chapters on Meredith's poetry in this book, Chs. XIV-XVII, were supplied by Basil de Sélincourt; but Mrs. Henderson herself wrote the chapter on Modern Love.

⁷Several unpublished dissertations and theses contain summaries, one of which, Norman Friedman's, will be discussed in some detail later.

and, again like the others before it, it does not elucidate the subtle psychological relationships which are the "causes" of these turnings.

After Henderson, the published summaries of the poem tend to be piecemeal, although they add occasional new and more detailed interpretations of particular stanzas or passages. Jack Lindsay, in George Meredith, His Life and Work (London, 1956), does give a stanza-by-stanza summary, but the actions he describes as well as the language he uses both strongly indicate that his summary is for the most part merely a somewhat briefer paraphrase of Henderson's summary rather than a fresh interpretation of the original work.

Meredith's other recent biographers, Siegfried Sassoon⁸ and Lionel Stevenson,⁹ include details of the action of the poem mostly only as they seem to relate to the actual circumstances of Meredith's first marriage. Also, a few details of the action are discussed in Walter Francis Wright's Art and Substance in George Meredith: A Study in Narrative (Lincoln, 1953). And Norman Kelvin, in A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith (Stanford, 1961), devotes several pages to a summary comprised largely of quotation. I have mentioned Kelvin's summary at this point as one of the commentaries occurring in a larger work devoted to Meredith's work in general, but since it is one of the last published commentaries in point of time, I shall discuss it in somewhat more detail further on.

Other than these, E. K. Chambers's essay on "Meredith's 'Modern Love'," in A Sheaf of Studies (Oxford, 1942), and C. Day Lewis's

⁸In Meredith (previously cited).

⁹In The Ordeal of George Meredith; A Biography (New York, 1953).

"Introduction" to Modern Love should be considered. Chambers's essay bears the date 1897 (which would make it an early analysis, prior to the work of Trevelyan and Henderson), but the book in which it appears was not published until 1942, as indicated above. Like Cavazza's commentary, Chambers's summary is surprisingly perceptive in part, frequently stating psychological generalizations about the action much more accurately than they have been stated by most later critics, but it falls into great uncertainty, which Chambers admits, concerning the course and causes of the action which comprises the climax and catastrophe of the poem.¹⁰

Day Lewis's "Introduction," written and published in 1948, is one of the longer commentaries on Modern Love as well as one of the more recent. However, Lewis spends much of his space either in discussing the poem's autobiographical background or in defending it against the charges of early reviewers that it deals amorally with a painful sexual subject. His brief summary of the action is, in its detailing of the final section (Stanzas XL-L),¹¹ inaccurate, since he quotes lines from Stanza XLVII (and speaks of emotions evoked in that stanza and in immediately surrounding stanzas) as occurring before the action in Stanza XLIII, from which he also quotes lines.¹² Besides summarizing the action inaccurately, Lewis also oversimplifies the dramatic conflict. "The dramatic shape of the poem," according to Lewis, "is created by the straight conflict between instinct and intelligence, without the

¹⁰Chambers, pp. 75, 80, and 82.

¹¹The section division here is Day Lewis's.

¹²Day Lewis, "Introduction," pp. ix-x.

mediation of any accepted moral code."¹³ Although I agree that the conflict does operate without the mediation of any "accepted moral code," in the sense of a traditional religious or social code, I shall demonstrate that the conflict stems not only from the opposing demands of "instinct and intelligence" but also, and perhaps more importantly, from the demands of an excessive idealism--an excessive personal moral expectation. "The dramatic shape of the poem" itself, Lewis does not elucidate other than to say that it is created by the straight conflict of instinct and intelligence.

What is lacking in all of these general commentaries, as I see it, is a very precise method of interpretation of the poem's individual images and image patterns. In reading through this commentary we find critics frequently differing one from another as to whether the gist of a given stanza or passage is "cynical" or "true to nature," "sentimental" or "profound," or even "comic" or "tragic"--in other words we frequently find given passages interpreted in almost exactly opposite ways. And in a broad sense almost all of these variant readings are justified by the imagery and rhetoric of the poem. I have already quoted Cavazza's comment that the sonnets are "subtle and charged with secondary and often vague meanings," and Arthur Symons speaks of "a double-mindedness more constant than that of Heine."¹⁴ Other critics, too, have frequently spoken of the ironies, the paradoxes, and the multiple suggestiveness

¹³Ibid., p. xix.

¹⁴"George Meredith as Poet," Saturday Review, July 13, 1901, p. 49 [Symons is not credited as author in this article itself, but the same material is reprinted in Symons's "George Meredith as a [sic] Poet," Figures of Several Centuries (London, 1916), pp. 141-152].

of the stanzas of Modern Love.

To repeat then, and extend what I said before, what is lacking in the previous general commentaries is any very precise method of mapping these separate levels of meaning and of weighing one against the other; there is, in fact, lacking any strong sense that one level may operate consistently and may control the other levels so as to constitute a cumulative and logical cause-and-effect structure.

Such a method of mapping the "controlling" level of meaning in Modern Love was, I believe, significantly elaborated by Norman Friedman in his specialized study of the image patterns, "The Jangled Harp: Symbolic Structure in Modern Love," previously cited.

Although Friedman himself does not directly make the following distinction, I think that we may set up as a working hypothesis that much of the imagery of Modern Love tends to operate on two different levels—one a conceptual and symbolic level and the other an emotional and connotative level. To extend the hypothesis further I would suggest that the conceptual level tends to reflect the husband's subconscious conceptions (of his own nature, of his wife's nature, and of the nature of their love relationships) and that the emotional and connotative level tends to reflect the husband's conscious moods and emotions. The rhetorical devices of the poem and the extended configurations of images, it might be added, tend to support the second level of meaning. I would further suggest that it is the second level, the conscious moods and emotions, that are rapidly shifting throughout the poem and that the subconscious conceptions are much more permanent; and I would also suggest that it is the slow evolution and modification of these underlying

conceptions which control the dramatic structure of the poem.¹⁵

Having said this much, I should admit that all of these generalizations are subject to qualification--for example, that not all images in the poem fit into these two categories; that the conceptual level involves some emotional elements just as the emotional level involves some conceptual elements; and that the two levels, even when they are understood as distinct, may at times, but only at times, run parallel to each other in their effect. Even with these qualifications, however, I think that these two categories will prove valuable.

To return to Friedman's article, what Friedman has done is to clarify, frequently for the first time, and to codify, certainly for the first time, the "symbolic" or "conceptual" meaning of a number of highly significant repeated images or "image clusters" in Modern Love. Exactly how many separate image clusters Friedman deals with, it is difficult to state, since the categorizing into clusters must be somewhat arbitrary. Thus, in his overall categorization, Friedman lists six clusters: (1) a "time-torpor-game-sun-wing" cluster; (2) a "murder-knife-wound-

¹⁵In introducing the term "subconscious" here, I do not intend to imply that Meredith himself necessarily had a fully articulated conception of a "subconscious" mind in the same sense, or perhaps in the same degree, that modern psychologists conceive of one, but that he does frequently image over-lapping and contradictory conceptions, not all of which the husband seems to hold in awareness at the same time, and some of which modern psychologists would themselves consider to be a function of the subconscious mind. The whole problem of relating Meredith's psychological perceptions and conceptions to modern psychological perceptions and conceptions is a very vexing one; but the fact that one is so frequently impelled to make comparisons in so many different areas--as I am impelled to do throughout this study--is perhaps an indication that the similarity in any given area is no accident, but instead the results of a whole organic conception of the psyche--however rudimentary in some areas--which is itself similar to the modern whole organic conception.

blood" cluster; (3) a "snare-bat-cage-pit-beast" cluster; (4) a "snake-venom-poison" cluster; (5) a "midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow" cluster; and (6) a "music-wave-horse-mark-on-shore" cluster.¹⁶ But in actual practice, the first cluster, for example, might have been as profitably divided into two clusters--a "time-torpor-game" cluster on the one hand and a "sun-wing" cluster on the other (and Friedman does later make separate generalizations concerning these two groups). Or again, in the sixth cluster, the "music" image is only very loosely related to the "wave-horse-mark-on-shore" cluster.

Also, a number of the individual image designations within the clusters as here stated must themselves be understood as representative of a number of more closely related images, so that they actually represent "clusters" in themselves. Thus, in the second cluster as listed above, Friedman uses "knife" as a representative also of such images as "sword" and "arrow," and "wound" as a representative of such images as "probes," "striking," and "stroke." Similarly, in the fourth category, "snake" has counterparts in such images as "serpent," "worm," and "hissing"; and "venom" and "poison" have less obvious counterparts in such images as "bitter" and "drug." Furthermore, and this Friedman fails to make very clear, such an image as the "sun" image has counterparts not only in the "star" image (frequently repeated), but also in such images as "upper sphere" and "queenly beautiful."

The central thesis of Friedman's article is that all of the individual images together with their imaginal counterparts that fall

¹⁶"The Jangled Harp," p. 13.

within a given "cluster," as he identifies it, tend to retain a core conceptual meaning that is consistent throughout the poem, or at least that evolves or modifies in terms that are consistent with the core conception. And I would add that these images retain their core conceptual value however the connotations or surface emotions evoked by these images or their counterparts in given forms and given rhetorical contexts may vary from the core conceptual meaning. This second assumption, while it is implied in Friedman's argument from time to time, is not, as I have suggested before, made explicit there.

An example of this distinction between the conceptual value of given images and their connotative value, and also something of the significance of this distinction, may be seen in an analysis of the following lines from Stanza VIII of Modern Love:

Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt
Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.
Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful
Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?
My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped
As balm for any bitter wound of mine:
My breast will open for thee at a sign!
But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
And they were music till he flung them down,
Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!¹⁷

Mrs. Henderson's summary of the entire stanza in which these lines occur is expressed in a single sentence: "At times he [the husband] is

¹⁷Quotations from Modern Love in this study are taken from The Poetical Works, pp. 133-155. For the sake of convenience, however, all such quotations hereafter will be identified only by stanza number and, at times, line number.

passionately pitiful, caring more for her lost loyalty than his own pain."¹⁸ And Day Lewis calls attention to the "impersonal glory" of the extended metaphor of the reed-pipes:

"Poetry like this is, it seems to me, final. It stirs and assuages, hurts and heals. It is quite merciless: yet it has the power, breathing as it were into the mouth of one's own puny experience, to reanimate, to enlarge, to make it less mortal."¹⁹

In this case, both Henderson's and Day Lewis's comments are descriptive, or at least suggestive, of the obvious "expressed" emotion and the connotative "gist" of this stanza. That is, focusing on the larger rhetorical and imaginal configurations, we can see that in lines 1-6, the husband is for the present manifestly more moved by his wife's suffering than by his own; that in line 4, he appears to leave the question of guilt open, fixing the blame on neither party; and that in lines 8-12, he does rise to a kind of tragic overview which comprehends the sufferings of both--the kind of "impersonal" viewpoint that Day Lewis describes very effectively.

And yet, if these observations were the whole implication of this stanza, we might wonder how it is that a husband, able to withhold judgment and rise above personal pain, is yet unable to find some solution to his marital problems; and we might question the artistic validity and coherence of a work which in one stanza shows a character as totally generous and apparently balanced in his appraisal of his situation and in immediately surrounding stanzas as filled with wrath and self-pity

¹⁸George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer, p. 66.

¹⁹Day Lewis, "Introduction," p. xxv.

(the later being largely the case in Stanzas VI, VII, . . . IX, and X).

The answers to these questions, and an understanding and appreciation of the artistic complexity and ultimate coherence of Modern Love, can be found, I believe, only in a very close examination of the conceptual value of the individual images as, in many cases, opposed to their connotative value in larger rhetorical units.

Thus, in line 3 of Stanza VIII, the husband refers to his wife as a "poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful." Even in this relatively brief phrase, the connotative value of the images is still largely sympathetic. But even though the "twisting worm" image here seems as much to suggest a pitiful victim as anything else, Friedman identifies this image, and I believe correctly, as a part of the "snake-venom-poison" cluster, mentioned above.²⁰ And the core conceptual value of this cluster is the sentimentalist's²¹ conception of his mate as a kind of witchlike betrayer. This negative conception stems originally from a polar conception of the mate as ideally beautiful, pure, and loyal (a further coordinate of this conception is that the sentimentalist conceives of his own feeling of attraction toward the mate as pure, rather than sexual, so that when he fears that the ideal bond between them has been broken, he tends to conceive of the attraction that he still feels as a poisonous attraction—the mate has become a witch-seducer extending the poisoned apple, as it were). Thus, in Stanza IX, the husband, caught between the two poles of his ambivalent feeling, stands near his wife

²⁰"The Jangled Harp," p. 22.

²¹The term "sentimentalist" used in reference to Modern Love has a specialized meaning which will be explained on pp. 37-39.

in the dusk:

And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,
He drank until the fluttering eyelids screened.
Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam
Of heaven's circle-glory!²²

The "young beam/ Of heaven's circle-glory" image is part of the "sun-(star)" cluster, previously mentioned, which is the type of imagery that Meredith uses to express the positive, or over-idealized, pole of the sentimentalist's conception. Similarly, in Stanza VII, the husband watches the wife issue "radiant from her dressing-room,/ Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:/ --By stirring up a lower, much I fear!" And he further conceives of her as "torturingly fair," with a "gold-eyed serpent dwelling rich hair."

Having observed these "snake-venom-poison" and "sun-(star)" cluster images or their counterparts operating in more obvious or overt contexts in the stanzas immediately surrounding Stanza VIII, it is now easier to observe that both poles of the husband's ambivalent sentimental conception of the wife are still represented in Stanza VIII itself (in this case, in the images "poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful") despite the overall sympathetic connotation of the stanza and the husband's obvious conscious desire to withhold judgment at this moment.

Similar underlying sentimental conceptions might also be discovered attached to the "bitter wound" image in line 6. The "bitter" image, according to Friedman, is part of the "snake-venom-poison" cluster,²³ while

²²

Unless otherwise noted, italics in quotations taken directly from Modern Love or from other Meredith poems are my own.

²³"The Jangled Harp," p. 22.

the "wound" image is part of the "murder-knife-wound-blood" cluster. The sentimentalist, having conceived of an ideal permanence for his love relationship, can conceive of its loss only in terms of an act of violence-- in Stanza XI, for example, the husband does explicitly accuse the wife of having "slain" their love and thereby his future felicity. Thus, in the present stanza, even though the husband is not at this moment primarily moved by his own pain, and even though he does consciously attempt to withhold judgment, the very term "wound" itself, rather than simply "pain" or "loss," implies an accusation or judgment on another level of his consciousness. It is, then, these underlying, and as it were "sub-conscious," sentimental conceptions which provide us with the data necessary to understand logically why the husband is unable to sustain the conscious suspension of blame and the emotional generosity that he shows to the wife in this stanza.

I have thus far dealt with Friedman's analysis of the image patterns of Modern Love only sketchily, and I shall be concerned with presenting, discussing, and developing his findings at greater length throughout much of my own study; but for the purposes of this introductory survey of previous commentary, I hope that the listing on pages 10 and 11 of the major classifications of image clusters, and of some of their counterparts, that Friedman treats has been sufficient at least to suggest the scope and complexity of his work. And I hope too that the above relatively extended examination of the passage from Stanza VIII will have indicated that the kind of close analysis of the conceptual value of individual images that Friedman initiated can make a highly significant difference in our understanding of given passages in the poem.

In the case of many of the more complex stanzas of Modern Love, it seems to me that the interpretations of critics prior to Friedman are analogous to the kind of views that might be obtained in walking around the outside of a house and trying to determine the disposition and décor of its rooms simply by looking through the windows. In such a case the views of any given room might vary according to the window through which one looked, with the views provided by the several windows perhaps contradicting one another. To extend the analogy further, then, what Friedman has done in his image study is to provide in many instances "keys" to the rooms, so that we can see them from the inside and thus obtain a full and accurate picture of their contents.

Since I shall often be drawing on Friedman's interpretations or using his observations as points of departure for my own study, I should also in this survey of previous commentary briefly outline what I consider to be the limitations of Friedman's work itself. Almost all of these limitations might be attributed either to the brevity and compression of Friedman's method of presentation or to the intentional limitations in content that he sets himself, rather than to what I would consider significant inaccuracies in his observations. The kinds of limitations that I find, I would list in four different categories.

The first of these categories has to do with Friedman's statement of the larger philosophical and psychological generalizations that underlie the structure of Modern Love. Although Friedman has stated--in many instances for the first time--a number of the most significant generalizations which inform the poem, and although these statements are basically accurate, nevertheless the form of the statements is frequently so brief and compressed, and the diction used is so much a kind of unexplained

"Meredithian" jargon (that is, conceptual terminology extracted from the whole body of Meredith's poetry, mostly from the later poetry, rather than from Modern Love itself), that it is extremely difficult to relate these generalizations either directly to Modern Love or to common human experience beyond the poem.²⁴ In my own study I shall attempt to expand and clarify all such generalizations (as well as generalizations of my own) not only in terms of the specific action of the poem but also in terms of common experience and at times in terms of traditional religious conceptions and modern (i.e., Freudian and later) psychological conceptions. Although there is of course always a danger of misunderstanding the terminology of traditional religion and of modern psychology as well as of misunderstanding "Meredithian" terminology, the process of translating and relating concepts from one "jargon" to another may itself help us to reach a "common" understanding of the concepts involved.

The second type of limitation that I find in Friedman's work is that his method of presentation and interpretation of the specific images that he treats is for the most part to list the central images in a particular "cluster," then to define in general terms the core conceptual value of this particular cluster, and then simply to list all of the images which comprise this cluster as they occur in succeeding stanzas throughout the poem—all without indicating just how these individual images operate in conjunction with the surrounding images in the particular stanzas in which they occur. Although this pattern of presentation is by far the most orderly and economical method for Friedman's purpose (that is, for

²⁴ Examples of some of Friedman's compressed generalizations and my own discussion of them may be found on pp. 29-40.

the purpose of inserting the greatest possible amount of the most essential data into the narrow confines of a specialized article intended for scholarly journal publication), it nevertheless makes great demands on the reader and leaves much analytical work undone. If, in our previous analogy, we compared the interpretations of earlier critics of Modern Love to the views that might be obtained of the rooms of a house simply by looking through the various windows, and if in extending this analogy we said that Friedman has supplied "keys" which admit us into many of these rooms, we should nevertheless further note that the "keys" Friedman has supplied are largely analogous to keys on a ring, or more exactly to keys on several rings, and that in order to open fully the door to any given room it might be necessary to combine and manipulate in various arrangements the appropriate keys from several different rings. In other words Friedman has provided us with extremely valuable tools to aid us in our comprehension of Modern Love, but he has not, in many cases, directly operated these tools for us.

The third type of limitation that I find in Friedman's article is clearly a limitation in its intended scope. For the most part, Friedman treats only images that are frequently repeated in the poem, which leaves a large number of images--usually, though not always, less frequently repeated images--still unexplained. Most of these images can themselves be better understood by cross-references from stanza to stanza and/or by cross-references to Meredith's other poetry, while some others must be puzzled out in a single occurrence. There are, however, surprisingly few images in Modern Love which do occur only in a single stanza.

Although the particular repeated images that Friedman treats do carry a large part of the core conceptual meaning of the poem, they do not carry

all of it. The central meaning of one of the most significant stanzas in the poem--the meaning of Stanza XLVII, which I consider to be the philosophical climax of the poem--is not carried by these images, and the central meaning of a number of other stanzas and smaller sections of stanzas is also not carried by these images. In addition, much of the subtlety of the action and the richness of texture of the poem is carried by images other than the ones Friedman considers.

My own study is intended to be as nearly exhaustive as possible in interpreting all images in Modern Love which might be unclear in any given context and in pointing out all significant cross-relationships from image to image and from stanza to stanza within the poem. I shall also frequently point out parallels between the imagery of Modern Love and the imagery of Meredith's other poems, though such parallels as these will not of course be "exhaustive."

In my study, then, I shall treat the same images that Friedman has treated in much greater detail than he has treated them--thus amplifying and further substantiating his highly significant insights; and I shall also apply a method of analysis somewhat similar to his, but again in much greater detail, to all that seems to need clarification among the rest of the images of the poem. In addition to its purely interpretative function, my stanza-by-stanza treatment will also include a running technical analysis of the narrative, rhetorical, and metaphorical devices by which Meredith achieves his effects--for example, an analysis of such devices as shifts in point of view, both in person and in tense, or again an analysis of the use of words with multiple meanings,²⁵ as these devices

²⁵What I am here calling "words with multiple meanings" is a device

function in the immediate stanzas in which they occur. In this whole process I shall provide a stanza-by-stanza explication of Modern Love which goes far beyond any previous explication of the action and meaning of the poem, and I shall also provide a running analysis of the techniques by which that meaning is achieved which likewise goes far beyond any previous study.

The final limitation that I see in Friedman's article is obviously a limitation dictated by its specialized nature as well as by its brevity. That is, as a specialized study of the "symbolic structure" afforded by the image patterns of Modern Love, Friedman's article does not deal at any significant length with such major technical problems as the poem's dramatic structure, the overall structure of its point of view, the structure of its seasonal imagery, or the peculiar structure and artistic merits of its stanza form--all of which technical problems I shall discuss at length in separate sections devoted to them, as I have indicated in my general "Introduction." It is worth noting here, however, that even in such matters as point of view and seasonal imagery, Friedman's article contains, just in its introductory passages, a greater amount of exact description than almost all of the previous "general" commentaries put together have contained--an indication really of how very little has been done in these areas.

of diction different from the phenomenon mentioned previously when I spoke of the distinction between the conceptual and the connotative values of many of Meredith's images. In this case, the "multiple meanings" are the separate denotative meanings provided by words which are actually distinct in meaning but spelled the same--such words as "elder," meaning a specie of tree, and "elder," meaning an old man, for example.

The first two limitations that I found in Friedman's article, it will be remembered, had to do with the difficulty of access of those insights which do definitely come within the intended scope of the article. As possible corroboration for my own impression of this difficulty of access, I would call attention to Norman Kelvin's commentary on Modern Love in A Troubled Eden: Nature and Society in the Works of George Meredith. Kelvin's study, previously mentioned, is the only relatively lengthy published commentary on the poem to have been composed after Friedman's article became available. Since Kelvin quotes Friedman's interpretation of the last four lines of Modern Love, and differs slightly with that interpretation,²⁶ it is clear that he is acquainted with Friedman's work. Otherwise, however, Kelvin seems to make no use of what I consider to be the extremely significant insights potential in Friedman's article, but instead goes back to Day Lewis for a description of the basic conflict of the poem as between "instinct and intelligence."²⁷ Paralleling Day Lewis, Kelvin himself, throughout his commentary, discusses the conflict as between "dark, irrational passion" and "intelligence,"²⁸ with almost no attention at all paid to the demands of an excessive idealism--an element of conflict with which Friedman is repeatedly concerned, and one which I also consider of major significance to the poem.

As for my own experience with Friedman's article, even after I was well acquainted with the poem itself and with previous criticism, I found it quite a slow and laborious process to assimilate Friedman's

²⁶ Kelvin, p. 26.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 28.

²⁸ Ibid.

generalizations and begin to make exact and effective use of his "image clusters" in interpreting the various levels of meaning in Modern Love. I might say, indeed, that I really clearly grasped Friedman's article only after reading his 500 page unpublished doctoral dissertation, "The Fire of Renewal: The Poetic Imagery of George Meredith" (Harvard, 1952), and seeing the same major generalizations and image interpretations re-phrased and manipulated repeatedly in various forms throughout that work.

In its own right, Friedman's dissertation is itself a significant source for the interpretation of Modern Love, and should be considered briefly here. As the title suggests, it is a study of frequently repeated images in the whole body of Meredith's poetry. As such it provides important background reading for an understanding of Meredith's other poems and of his nature philosophy in general, all of which understanding can be applied independently to Modern Love, as well as to Friedman's periodical article itself. In other words, the article, while it is a well-written (though extremely compressed) refining of a number of insights in the dissertation, cannot be expected to mine the whole potential of a much longer study devoted to the whole of Meredith's poetry.

In addition to its significance as background reading, the dissertation also contains a nine page introduction and a thirty-seven page (typewritten) stanza-by-stanza explication of Modern Love, which is a longer stanza-by-stanza summary of the action than any of the published ones previously mentioned. Except in regard to perhaps a dozen²⁹ of the fifty stanzas, however, this explication is itself rather sketchy,

²⁹Stanzas II, VI, X, XIII, XXIII, XXIV, XXIX, XXX, XXXIII, XLVIII, XLIX, and L are among those receiving the fullest treatment in the dissertation.

containing at best most of the limitations which I listed for the periodical article, and in many instances proving to be less clearly expressed and less thorough in its listing of important "image cluster" relationships than the later periodical article. Like the article it does not mine the whole potential of the dissertation in relation to Modern Love; like the article it does not take note of a great number of usually less frequently repeated images in the poem; and like the article it does not lay claim to any large scale technical analysis of the poem other than an image analysis.

In summary, then, neither Friedman's 500 page dissertation dealing with the whole body of Meredith's poetry, nor his seventeen page specialized periodical article is a thoroughly adequate instrument for dealing with the complexities of Modern Love. Although I shall make very substantial use of Friedman's findings, with credit thereto, I shall, I believe, in my own 282 page study devoted exclusively to Modern Love go significantly beyond Friedman, as well as beyond other critics, both in thoroughness of interpretation, and in technical analysis of the poem, the latter category being really still almost unexplored territory.

One final commentary should be considered here before concluding this summary of previous criticism. This is Elizabeth Cox Wright's specialized article, "The Significance of the Image Patterns in Meredith's Modern Love," mentioned along with Friedman's article at the beginning of this chapter. According to the editor's note, this essay was prepared before the appearance of Friedman's article, and it was not judged necessary to ask Miss Wright to revise her essay to bring the two into focus, although the editor goes on to suggest that something very interesting

might be done in the way of a comparison of the two essays.

Although I should not wish to undertake any detailed comparison, for my own part I do not find Miss Wright's essay nearly as informative as Friedman's. Her article suffers, I believe, especially in its rather long introductory section, from grandiose, overly technical, and, in the final analysis, rather vague generalizations, many of which might be applied just as well to almost any "complex" poetical work as to Modern Love. And even in its body her essay is rather more "suggestive" than precisely informative. With reference to five stanzas (I, XV, XXIII, XLIX, and L), her treatment is relatively detailed and certainly significant, but other than this she limits herself to tracing only two "image patterns" throughout the poem as a whole. Philosophically, she relates a number of images in the poem somewhat loosely to a "lost paradise" theme, but otherwise I do not see that her choice and categorization of "image patterns" leads to any clarification of the very complex psychological and philosophical relationships that underlie the structure of Modern Love. On the whole, then, I consider Miss Wright's article as valuable in suggesting, and at times in documenting, the "richness" of the image configurations in Modern Love, but I do not find it of much help in clarifying the important conceptual themes of the poem.

I shall of course credit Miss Wright's work, as well as the work of other critics, wherever I make use of their observations, but the great bulk of my obligation will be to Friedman; and I shall on the whole be concerned with squaring my observations with his observations, rather than with those of other critics.

CHAPTER III

AN EXPLICATION AND ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

Introduction to Explication and Analysis

Because Modern Love is a narrative poem whose dramatic conflict is played out for the most part not in terms of objective action, but in terms of complex subjective changes in the protagonists' attitudes toward their experience, it may be economical to preface a stanza by stanza analysis of the poem with a tentative explanation of some of the philosophical and psychological principles which underlie these changes. In the process of presenting these prefatory remarks I shall also attempt to indicate more clearly the scope and substance of my debt to Friedman's work.

According to Friedman,

The key moral ideas informing [the action of Modern Love] derive from the Meredithian "triad," for he regards man's nature as triple: Spirit (or soul) emerging from the creative union of Blood (body) and Brain (mind). This harmony is called Wisdom; its absence is Egoism, which takes four coordinate forms, each connoting an excessive striving after Spirit or Blood or Brain alone, and each finding itself therefore paradoxically reversed, "singularly doomed/ To what [it] execrates and writhes to shun" (p. 245). Thus, the cynic (who denies the soul) is a frustrated sentimentalist (who abhors the body and neglects the mind) or an idealist turned inside out; while the "pinched" ascetic (who denies the body) is a sated or disillusioned sensualist (who revels in the body) or a prurient hypocrite.¹

¹"The Jangled Harp," p. 12.

At a first reading, the second half of this statement--with its proliferation of parentheses and alternate terms--may seem to present the more serious difficulty. But here the difficulty does lie simply in the overall compression and in the unfamiliarity of some of the terms. When read carefully, this half of the statement does "add up," as I shall indicate later on. A much more fundamental difficulty, however, may be discovered in the first half of the above statement. The problem here is that Friedman fails to make clear, as it seems to me, whether the Meredithian "triad" involves really only two functional elements or whether all three elements are capable of functioning simultaneously.

Thus Friedman says first that "Spirit" emerges from the creative union of "Blood" and "Brain," which would seem to indicate that "Spirit" is a resultant element, not a functional one; and he goes on to say that "this harmony" (which again would seem to be simply the harmony of "Blood" and "Brain") is called "Wisdom." And yet the absence of "Wisdom," which he calls "Egoism," he defines as taking "four coordinate forms, each connoting an excessive striving after Spirit or Blood or Brain alone"--which would at least suggest that "Spirit," in its own right, is a functioning element.

In one sense, it is perhaps unjust to hold Friedman responsible for the ambiguity in this statement: in so far as I have been able to discover, no other critic has really clarified the working relationships between the three parts of the Meredithian "triad"; and the ambiguity exists, indeed, in Meredith's work itself, at least in any given poetic or fictional statement of the "triad." Friedman, certainly, within the narrow confines of his specialized article, had little space to theorize on, or to clarify, these relationships at length.

Nevertheless, the ambiguity does exist and it should be recognized and explained in so far as possible. What is generally considered to be the central statement of the "triad" in Meredith's work occurs in the long didactic poem The Woods of Westermain:

Then for you are pleasures pure,
 Sureties as the stars are sure:
 Not the wanton beckoning flags
 Which, of flattery and delight,
 Wax to the grim Habit-Hags
 Riding souls of men to night:
 Pleasures that through blood run sane,
 Quickening spirit from the brain.
 Each of each in sequent birth,
 Blood and brain and spirit, three
 (Say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
 Join for true felicity.
 Are they parted, then expect
 Some one sailing will be wrecked:
 Separate hunting are they sped,
 Scan the morsel coveted.
 Earth that Triad is: she hides
 Joy from him who that divides;
 Showers it when the three are one
 Glassing her in union.

(pp. 201-202)²

Here again we have an insistence on the "Triad," only two parts of which are explicitly demonstrated to be functioning elements. Thus, in the middle lines of the passage, blood (otherwise imaged as "Pleasures") and brain (otherwise imaged as "sane") are the two elements which, through their proper balance, create the third, spirit. But if only two need to be balanced to create the third (which appears to be the desired goal), why then does Meredith, in the next lines, insist on the balancing of all three—why does he say that all three must "Join for true felicity"?

²All quotations from Meredith's poems in this study, unless otherwise noted, are taken from The Poetical Works. For the sake of convenience and clarity, titles of poems will be underlined, and page references for quotations, other than quotations from Modern Love, will be enclosed in parentheses in the text itself, as illustrated above.

This question can, I think, be answered only in terms of Time (or change)--a key element in Meredith's philosophy (as we shall note elsewhere), here negatively suggested in the phrase "Habit-Hags," but not explicitly integrated into the statement of the triad itself. Friedman, too, recognizes the extreme significance of Time in Meredith's thought, but--like Meredith himself--he never, as it seems to me, quite makes clear its inherent relationship to the triad as such.

Before pursuing this line of thought further, it might be best to pause here to consider what Meredith means by the term "spirit" itself, in isolation. Joseph Warren Beach, in his chapter on Meredith in The Concept of Nature in Nineteenth-Century English Poetry--which is a careful and relatively thorough analysis of Meredith's nature philosophy--writes:

It would doubtless make for clearness if, in place of spirit, we should read, in Meredith, "moral ideal." For it is invariably a moral or humane ideal which he has in mind when he talks of spirituality. Meredith, if he is assuming "a spiritual element in nature," is simply assuming that human beings are capable of a humane ideal. They are capable of conceiving it so vividly in their imaginations as to put a constraint upon their selfish impulses in hopes of furthering this ideal on earth.³

Earlier in the same chapter, Beach defines Meredith's use of the term "spiritual life" as "a life given significance by ethical preference, choices, evaluations. It is such ethical evaluations which for him give meaning to life."⁴

And in somewhat different terms, G. M. Trevelyan, in The Poetry and Philosophy of George Meredith, describes Meredith's conception of spirit (or soul) as follows:

³New York, 1936, p. 480.

⁴Ibid.

The soul is the flushing of the brain by the blood, of the cold intellectual by the hot animal. On the spiritual plane, it is passion guided by reason, thought ennobled by emotion. To Mr. Meredith the soul is a spiritual reality, but it is not something preternatural breathed into our clay from above. The soul is to him the flower of evolution.⁵

I have quoted from these two well-known commentaries on Meredith's nature philosophy to show that it is generally understood that Meredith's conception of "spirit" or "soul" is not a "preternatural" or "traditionally religious" conception; and at the same time I have quoted from them to begin to find some generally accepted terms in which we can describe Meredith's conception.

From the first of these commentaries, we can extract that Meredith's conception of "spirit" involves a capacity to conceive of and to be motivated by "moral ideals," and from the second, we can extract that it involves a capacity for 'emotionalized thought'--that is for holding mental conceptions (of choices of conduct, as we may interpolate) charged by emotion.

And from this point, we may speculate that if Meredith has a conception of man's capacity to conceive and hold moral ideals, charged by emotion (emotion being impetus to action)--even though this capacity is itself an end product of the interaction of "blood" and "brain"--it may nevertheless itself exist at any given time as a separate guiding and motivating entity. And we may further speculate that if Meredith's conception is an evolutionary and emergent one (as it is generally understood to be), then this entity--this body of moral ideas, emotionally charged--is an imperfect and changing entity: in other words that these moral ideals may at any given time be false ideals, inexact ideals, or simply out-of-date ideals.

⁵Poetry and Philosophy, p. 178.

That Meredith does have some kind of conception of a "reservoir" of emotionalized idealism--the ideals being often in need of change or correction--as a functional element in man's nature is, I think, amply evidenced in his work. It is evidenced first simply by his frequent treatment of specific false or inexact ideals which may guide, fairly adequately, the individual (or man as an evolutionary being) at one point in his development but which become inadequate as guides for further development. Thus, for example, on the racial scale, in Earth and Man Meredith seems to suggest that the "fables" of traditional religious doctrine may be a valuable guide to man at one stage of his evolution, but that the real truths of universal law may not be available to him until he has evolved further in interaction with Earth or nature:

XL

His fables of the Above,
And his gapped readings of the crown and sword,
The hell detested and the heaven adored,
The hate, the love,

XLI

The bright wing, the black hoof,
He shall peruse, from Reason not disjoined,
And never unfaith clamouring to be coined
To faith by proof.

XLII

She her just Lord may view,
Not he, her creature, till his soul has yearned
With all her gifts to reach the light discerned
Her spirit through.

(p. 245)

Similarly, on the individual scale, Meredith seems to suggest, in Modern Love and other works, that certain of the ideals of sentimental love may be a sufficient guide for the young lover (or the person in the initial stages of a love relationship) but that such ideals are a seriously

inadequate guide to take him through subsequent necessary stages of growth and change.

Besides this frequent treatment of specific ideals which may serve as guides to man's actions at one point in his development and then become inadequate as guides at later points, there is also some evidence by direct statement concerning a "reservoir" of emotionalized idealism in Meredith's work, although he at times greatly confuses the issue, as it seems to me, by introducing a fourth term, "heart," to designate this function--a term which he fails to relate clearly to the three basic terms of the "triad." In the Ode to the Comic Spirit, for example, he writes:

Ah, what a fruitless breeder is this heart,
Full of the mingled seeds, each eating each.
Not wiser of our mark than at the start,
It surges like the wrath-faced father Sea
To countering winds; a force blind-eyed,
On endless rounds of aimless reach;
Emotion for the source of pride,
The grounds of faith in fixity
Above our flesh; its cravings urging speech,
Inspiring prayer; by terms a lump
Swung on a time-piece, and by turns
A quivering energy to jump
For seats angelical.
(p. 399)

Although the suggestions here are rather fuzzy and overlapping, this passage, it appears to me, does refer to an element in man's nature which is distinct from his "blood" (or "flesh") and his "brain" (though it appears to be the product of the two: "full of the mingled seed")--it does refer to a "source" or "reservoir" of idealism, emotionally charged, in man's nature, however "blind-eyed" this idealism may be.

Finally, the term "spirit" itself is occasionally directly linked to the conception of the necessity of "change" by Meredith, as in the couplet

"Change, the strongest son of Life,/ Has the Spirit here to wife" in The Woods of Westernmain (p. 199).

What I am suggesting in all of this, then, is that Meredith's psychological theory does have at its center a conception of a genuinely functional tripartite division in man's psyche, somewhat analogous to the tripartite division--"id," "ego," and "superego"--in modern psychological theory.⁶ And Meredith further believed that man's safest guide to conduct, his surest source of "wisdom," at any given moment derived from a balancing of the demands of all three of these elements--blood, brain, and spirit. The moral "wisdom" resulting from this balance at any given moment is then a new quantity of idealism, an addition to the reservoir of "spirit" to be used as a partial guide for any future choice confronted by the psyche. Unfortunately for the clarity of the presentation of his theory, however, Meredith, as I have suggested, tended to reserve the term "spirit" for the future or emerging product "wisdom," and to use the fourth term "heart" when referring to the past inexact or outdated "ideals" which are as likely as not to misguide man.

⁶Meredith's conception of the blood is, I think, reasonably close to the modern conception of the id; and his conception of the spirit is, I think, fairly close to the modern conception of the superego. I do not think that Meredith would have imagined such a "reservoir" (as I call it) of moral ideals and impulsion to be so largely a product of early childhood training as modern psychologists imagine the "reservoir" of the superego impulses to be; nor do I think that he conceived of either the impulses of the blood or the impulses of the spirit as operating so frequently on a subconscious level, not readily accessible to reason, as modern psychologists conceive of the id and the superego as operating. Beyond this I am less sure how far his conception of brain might be paralleled with the modern conception of the ego, other than that both brain and ego may probably be understood as that faculty of the psyche which is most reasonably concerned with the individual's more immediate and tangible well-being. I realize that all such speculations are tenuous and unsubstantiated, but I put them forward as at least considered approximations and suppositions.

I do not think, in all of the above, that I am really departing from what is implied in the observations of other critics such as Friedman, Beach, and Trevelyan in commenting on the Meredithian "Triad," but I have tried to clarify certain "working relationships" that they have left ambiguous.

To return now to the statement which I originally quoted from Friedman's article, according to that statement the absence of Wisdom, in Meredithian theory, is Egoism,

which takes four coordinate forms, each connoting an excessive striving after Spirit or Blood or Brain alone, and each finding itself therefore paradoxically reversed, "singularly doomed/ To what [it] execrates and writhes to shun."

The four basic terms, for forms of Egoism, which Friedman then lists are "cynic," "sentimentalist," "ascetic," and "sensualist." Of these, the term "sentimentalist" has the least common meaning in Meredithian usage. It is also the most inclusive of the four terms. Both Meredith and Friedman, in commenting on Meredith, use the term somewhat interchangeably for the term "Egoist," especially in reference to Modern Love. Meredith, in a letter to his friend Jessopp some two years after the publication of the poem, spoke of Modern Love as "a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days, [which] could only be apprehended by the few who would read it many times."⁷

It should be understood, of course, that Meredith's use of the term "sentimentalist" is a very specialized one. He does not use the term at all to refer to a person who is superficially emotional or maudlin, as is the most common usage, but instead to refer to a person who has serious

⁷Letters, I, 156.

misconceptions of his own nature and of his own motivations in interpersonal relationships. In this sense "sentimentalism," as Meredith conceives of it, is really a form of psychic pathology or maladjustment and as such has analogies with certain of the pathological "neuroses," as we now conceive of them--both in its widespread occurrence and in its difficulty of detection. Thus, for example, the sentimentalist may frequently go unrecognized by his neighbors just as the neurotic may (indeed most of us probably harbor unrecognized sentimental fantasies within ourselves just as we harbor neurotic fantasies). And again, the sentimentalist may function quite efficiently and contentedly as long as his sentimental system is not threatened, just as the neurotic may function efficiently as long as his neurotic system is not threatened.⁸

Specifically, in the context of a love relationship, what the sentimentalist expects--as Friedman indicates and as we shall see throughout this study--is an ideal permanence for his love. And he bases this expectation first on a conception that he and his love partner are in some "spiritual" or "higher" way ideally suited for one another.⁹

⁸The relationship between Meredith's conception of sentimentalism and the modern conception of neurosis is discussed at somewhat greater length on pp. 213-215.

⁹I am here using the term "spiritual" to designate what is probably an "unrealistic" quality in human relationships--something conceived of as other than physical attraction and other than merely a fairly large degree of community of interest between two people, something conceived of as a kind of one-to-one soul identity. Historically the conception may stem in part from the Courtly Love ideals, as celebrated first in Provençal lyric poetry of the 12th Century; then, in modified form, in Spenser's The Faerie Queene; then on down through the "star-crossed lovers" tradition of Elizabethan drama; and thence to the Romantic love tradition of the English novel which held vogue through most of the Victorian Period when a few novelists, such as Meredith himself in The Ordeal of Richard Feverel, began to dramatize the weaknesses in the tradition. Undoubtedly, much of this kind of romantic expectation still exists today,

Recognizing in theory that "sensual" or animal attractions are by nature transient and subject to change, he mistakes his own feelings of sexual attraction toward his partner for spiritual attraction, and thereby believes that his attraction is not subject to change. Similarly, conceiving of himself as ideally suited for his partner and as deserving to be the subject of a spiritual rather than a merely sexual attraction, he does not conceive of the partner's feelings as subject to change either.

It is this kind of "sentimental" conception that Friedman calls an "excessive striving" after "Spirit" alone. It is a "striving after spirit" in that it is a seeking for some permanent or future value for present action, but it is "excessive" in that it expects to come by that future value too easily and too assuredly, and also because it is partially false in that it denies the degree to which it is sensually motivated and in that it fails to recognize the way in which nature really works. Thus, as Friedman says, the sentimentalist "abhors the body and neglects the mind" (the mind, which should of course help to instruct the sentimentalist to a better understanding of nature).

Now, as I have already suggested, this kind of sentimental conception, this kind of "moral ideal," may serve as a sufficient guide for the individual in the early stages of a love relationship, while sexual and all other impulses tend to bind the couple together, but once a significant degree of natural change has occurred—once sexual impulses have become diffused and other interests have become disparate—then the whole

though in perhaps more subtly disguised forms. The tendency itself to hope for such an ideal one-to-one identity between lovers, modern psychologists would probably attribute to a subconscious longing for the kind of total identity and attention initially experienced in the mother-child relationship and to the narcissistic longing to love oneself, which in turn probably stems from the mother-child relationship.

sentimental system may be shaken by distrust between the two. In this case the "sentimentalist" may lose faith in the "spiritual" worth of his love relationship and of his own impulses, and thus may find himself "paradoxically reversed," as Friedman says, to become a "cynic"--that is, to become one who intellectually denies the possibility of any spiritual or lasting worth in human action and in interpersonal relationships.

Unable any longer to justify his sexual impulses toward the partner as "spiritual" attraction, the "sentimentalist" turned "cynic" may then, in despair, abandon himself to any and all sexual gratifications--thus becoming a "sensualist"--or again, in idealistic revulsion from his "sensualism," deny himself any sexual gratification at all, even with the original partner, thus becoming an "ascetic"--all of this without ever coming to realize that lasting value may be found in working through interpersonal relationships, however uncertain they may be, and in recognizing sexual impulses for what they are and taking moral responsibility for controlling and channeling them within the contexts of necessarily uncertain love relationships.

Thus, as Friedman goes on to state

the curve of the husband's change in Modern Love, in contrast to the wife's pathetic inability to change and her tragic suicide as a result, can be plotted in terms of a progression through his early sentimentalism, to his subsequent cynicism and half-hearted sensualism, and on to a balanced wisdom which reveals to him his own egoism as a cause of the failure of his marriage.¹⁰

With considerable leeway for complex shifting back and forth between these stages, this is the general progression which I shall trace in my stanza-by-stanza explication of the poem, and which Friedman himself traces, in less detail, in his article and in his dissertation.

¹⁰"The Jangled Harp," pp. 12-13.

In order to plot these relationships--as I indicated previously--Friedman has traced a series of image linkages and recurrences throughout the poem and has assigned a common conceptual value to the images in each one of these clusters. Although I have already listed these clusters in bare outline in my "A Survey and Analysis of Previous Criticism" chapter, and although it will be necessary to repeat a number of generalizations connected with them from time to time throughout my explication, I think it may be well to outline these clusters once more here--in order to give proper credit to Friedman; in order to make sure that the generalizations concerning them are clear, and clearly related to the major generalizations of the poem previously stated; and finally in order to indicate certain modifications and additions that I would make to the clusters and to the generalizations. Also, the kind of outline that I shall employ at this point--which is, in part, a much briefer presentation than Friedman's own--may provide a handy check list of occurrences and a more graphic indication of density for each of the image clusters concerned.

The first cluster which Friedman lists is a "time-torpor-game-sun-wing" cluster--which cluster generally reflects the couple's sentimentalism. But conceptually this cluster may be broken into two separate clusters--a "time-torpor-game" cluster and a "sun-wing" cluster--and to some extent Friedman makes logically distinct generalizations concerning the two, although he tends to lump them together in other generalizations.

"The touchstone for the recognition of a sentimentalist," as Friedman states, "is his attitude toward Time. . . . The Egoist is impatient with the wheeling of Earth's great cycles, and insists upon an ideal

permanence over and above natural change."¹¹ This conception of the sentimentalist's insistence on an ideal permanence and his fear of time or change, we have of course already discussed somewhat, and we need add here only that Friedman finds images directly indicating the couple's fear of change in Stanzas III, IV, XII, XIII, XIX, XXIX, XLII, and L.¹²

"As a consequence of this distorted view of Time," as Friedman continues, "the entire poem is pervaded by a thick and heavy atmosphere of sultry immobility, of frozen will and suspended desire."¹³ And Friedman lists images indicating such a torpid atmosphere in Stanzas I ("muffled pulses"); II ("languid humour"); XVI ("Time is whispering"); XXXIV ("Our chain on silence clanks./ Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs"); XXXVII ("we care not if the bell be late:/ Though here and there grey seniors question Time/ In irritable coughings"); and XLVI ("strangely dumb" and "hum/ Of loneliness").¹⁴

A counterweight to the "torpor" motif in the poem, as Friedman indicates, is provided by the "game" motif:

Since the sentimentalist cannot incorporate the fact of change into his scheme of values, his behavior resolves ultimately into a kind of manic-depressive shift: sometimes he is sunk under an

¹¹"The Jangled Harp," pp. 13-14.

¹²Ibid., p. 14 (The "time" images in these particular stanzas are obvious; but in the case of clusters where the images in question are less obvious, I will list the specific images for each stanza).

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid., pp. 14-15 (Unless otherwise noted, italics in quotations ascribed to Friedman's work--both in Friedman's own commentary and in passages that Friedman quotes from Meredith's poems--are Friedman's. As indicated in Chapter II, unless otherwise noted, italics in passages which I quote directly from Meredith's works are my own).

oppressive cloud, sometimes he is gay and superficial--all in an effort to ignore and gloss over the reality of the situation.¹⁵

Game and play-acting images, Friedman finds in Stanzas XIV, XVII, XXVIII, XXXV, and XXXVIII.¹⁶ Besides these direct references to games and performances which Friedman lists, the atmosphere of superficial gaiety and of false cordiality between the two is reflected in a number of other stanzas.¹⁷

The "time," "torpor," and "game" images are all obviously directly related to the sentimentalist's attitude toward change and to his resistance of change. The "sun" image, on the other hand, while it does reflect the couple's sentimentalism, is related to the conception of change only perhaps in that in one instance, in Stanza XXX, the brilliance of the "sun" tends to blind the sentimentalist to a fact of change, in the form of death--as Friedman notes, it tends to dissolve, in that stanza, "the distant shadow of the tomb." Otherwise, the "sun" image relates more directly to the sentimentalist's conception of himself, to his demand for superiority, dominance, and centrality. As Friedman writes:

Normally a paradisaical symbol of the Ideal (cf. its use in Dante's Paradiso), the sun in Meredith's poetry serves nevertheless infernally as a vehicle of excessive idealism. Thus, in X, the husband speaks of the sentimental character of the love upon which their marriage was based: "Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;/ At least, the sun far brighter there did beam."¹⁸

¹⁵"The Jangled Harp," p. 15.

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 15-16.

¹⁷See Stanzas II; VI; VII; IX; XXI; XXIII ("carouse"); XXXIV ("With commonplace I freeze her"); XXXVI; XXXVII; and XLV for examples of "smiling" and "laughing" images presented in ironic contrast to the painful underlying emotions of the couple.

¹⁸"The Jangled Harp," p. 16.

Besides this occurrence in X, Friedman also lists occurrences of the "sun" image in Stanza XXVIII--where the husband demands a "superior-inferior relationship . . . [signalizing] the sexual Egoist" with his blonde Lady--and in Stanza XXX, already mentioned, where "Love, the crowning sun" dissolves "the distant shadow of the tomb."¹⁹ Later in his article Friedman calls attention to one other less obvious "sun" image in Stanza IX ("heaven's circle-glory").²⁰

Directly related to the "sun" image is what Friedman designates as the "wing" image or motif. Actually, he is here referring to an "eagle" image which occurs in Stanza XXVI and to a "falcon" image which occurs in Stanza L. Since both the eagle and the falcon are "sun-striving" birds, as Friedman puts it, and since they are also generally thought of as idealized and dominant birds, the conceptual relationship of these images to the "sun" image should need no further amplification at this point.

The next major image cluster which Friedman deals with is a "murder-knife-wound-blood" cluster. In a general sense, this cluster, Friedman says, expresses "the husband's disillusionment,"²¹ and in more detail, he writes:

Cynic and sensualist are inverted idealists; "mincing the facts of life" (X) soon denudes it of value altogether. In section L the narrator explains that mutual distrust is what killed their love: "Then each applied to each that fatal knife, / Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole." They developed a fatal capacity for seeing "through simulation to the bone" (XLIV), and were cursed with the ability to "interpret where the mouth is dumb," to "see the side-lie of a truth" (XXVI). Thus idealized love becomes, in

¹⁹"The Jangled Harp," p. 16.

²⁰Ibid. p. 21.

²¹Ibid. p. 13.

the hands of the sentimentalist, a two-edged "sword that severs all," the symbolic sword which lies between the couple as they lie comfortless upon their marriage-bed-tomb in section I.²²

What Friedman seems to be emphasizing most here is the sentimentalist's own cynicism--his excessive idealism reversed--as an actual murderer or instrument of murder of love. While this may be partly the case, I think it is equally important to note here the distortion in the sentimentalist's conception of the partner's role in the love relationship. Since the sentimentalist conceives of an ideal permanence for love, he can conceive of its loss only in terms of an act of violence, and thus he tends to conceive of the partner as a deliberate murderer of love. The "murder-knife-wound-blood" imagery, then, really serves a kind of dual role in the poem--expressing on the one hand the actual violence that the couple, through mutual distrust, do to their love relationship (which together with natural causes helps to bring about its demise) and expressing on the other hand the imagined violence which each attributes to the other as a deliberate murderer of love. And, in fact, an important part of the dramatic movement of the poem is carried by the husband-speaker's progressively more frequent application of these "murder-wound" images to his own actions, the progression finally culminating in his realization, in Stanza XLIII, that "No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:/ We are betrayed by what is false within."

This dual role of the "murder-knife-wound-blood" imagery and this progression, Friedman does not make explicit, although he does make somewhat similar observations concerning related images elsewhere in his article and dissertation.

²²"The Jangled Harp," p. 17.

In addition to the "knife" and "probes" images in Stanza I and the "sword" image in Stanza I, mentioned in the quotation above, Friedman finds "murder-knife-wound-blood" imagery in Stanzas II; VI ("striking" and "stroke"); VIII; XI ("slain"); XIX; XXVI; XXXV; and XXXVI ("probed").²³

The third major image cluster which Friedman traces throughout the poem is a "snare-bat-cage-pit-beast" cluster, which cluster he sees as generally expressing the husband's sensualism. Speaking of the "snare" image, which occurs in Stanza I in conjunction with the "falcon" image, he writes:

In the sense of trap or cage, the snare functions as a vehicle of sensualism: the idealist tries to etherealize his love by divorcing passion from devotion, but the ugly monster will not down and the noise of his rattling the bars of his prison permeates the poem. Along with this symbolism occurs similar imagery of the fall, pit, or underworld whence issue the snarling beasts of rebellious desire.²⁴

The connection here of "beast" and "snare" (in the sense of being caught up or ensnared by passion) with sensualism is a fairly common one, but we might also note the excessiveness of the use of the "fall," "pit," and "underworld" imagery in this connection. This "hellish" imagery is used, in fact, almost entirely in reference to the sexual attraction which the wife still exerts over the husband after their estrangement. The excessive idealist, unable any longer to find an outlet for his sexual drives under the guise of spiritual attraction in his love relationship, is revulsed and frightened by his own sexual feeling; and beyond this his conception of the love partner is distorted so that he now conceives of her physical attractiveness as a diabolical, devilish attraction. This distorted conception of the love partner, Friedman himself discusses in

²³"The Jangled Harp," pp. 17-18.

²⁴Ibid., p. 18.

connection with the next major image cluster that he treats, but I think it worthwhile also to call attention to it in connection with the present cluster. This distortion is of course similar to the distortion previously discussed in which the sentimentalist sees the love partner as a deliberate murderer of love.

"Snare-bat-cage-pit-beast" images, Friedman finds in Stanzas II; IV; V ("tame" and "bites"); VII ("den"); IX; XXII ("hell" and "gulf"); XXIII; XXVI ("web"); XXVII; XXVIII ("promptings of Satanic power"); XXX ("animals"); XXXII ("still frets"); ("hogs"); XL ("seized . . . throat"); XLVIII ("mesh"); and L.²⁵

The next major cluster that Friedman discusses is a "snake-venom-poison" cluster, and, as I have already indicated, it is here that he calls particular attention to the husband's distorted view of the wife, resulting from his sentimentalist-cynic-sensualist imbalance. Thus Friedman writes:

That such an ambivalence is bound to generate a complex image of woman is a psychological truism; our wishes color what we see in such a way that the objects of perception often seem to mirror our own internal states. Thus the husband of the poem sees in his wife a projection of his own unreconciled impulses: "Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam/ Of heaven's circle-glory!" he cries in section IX. The positive side of this metaphor refers to the rising sun, and in itself points back to the imagery of idealized love which we have already examined. The psychic movement behind these lines springs from the fact that the fascination exercised by the image of woman as the cherisher-comforter serves to increase the terror of its polar aspect as the enslaver-betrayer.⁶ [Cf. Maud Bodkin, Archetypal Patterns in Poetry (London, New York, and Toronto, 1934 [1948]), p. 173 and Chap. IV entire.—Friedman's note] That is, it is only because he desires her so intensely that she can appear in so deadly a light. . . .

The image of the woman-betrayer, as we might expect, is the one which dominates Modern Love. The snake in particular is frequently associated with the wife.²⁶

²⁵"The Jangled Harp," pp. 18-20 (On pp. 19 and 20 Friedman calls attention to the "bird-snare" combinations in XXVI, XLVIII, and L).

²⁶Ibid., pp. 20-22.

The serpent is of course the traditional Christian symbol of temptation, and when the serpent image is applied directly to woman, she herself is seen, by a telescoping of the Biblical story, as a deliberate temptress and betrayer of man. Friedman includes in the snake cluster not only "venom" and "poison" images per se--where the linkage is fairly obvious--but also "bitter" and "drug" images. Although I think this latter connection is justified, we might note here that the "bitter" image suggests less distortion on the husband's part than the snake images--his real situation is certainly "bitter," and it is only in conjunction with other images such as "bitter wound" (VIII) that a significant distortion of the wife's actions is reflected. Also, the "drug" images are frequently used as foreshadowing for the wife's actual death by poison, rather than as a reflection of the husband's conception of his situation. The "snake" imagery itself the husband later in the poem applies occasionally to himself, which marks indirectly a lessening in his distortion of the wife's part in their tragedy. This particular progression Friedman himself calls attention to.²⁷

"Snake-venom-poison" images Friedman lists in Stanzas I ("little gaping snakes" and "pale drug"); II ("bitter taste" and "poison flowers"); VI ("O bitter barren woman!"); VII; VIII ("poor twisting worm" and "bitter wound"); IX ("poison-cup"); XII ("drink oblivion of a day"); XIV ("bitter ill"); XVI ("salt");²⁸ XXVI ("serpent" and "venom"); XXXII; XXXIII; XXXIV;

²⁷"The Jangled Harp," p. 22.

²⁸The "salt" image in XVI is used by Meredith first on a literal level, and second, in so far as it is symbolic, in a favorable rather than a pejorative sense. For these reasons, I do not think it belongs in the "snake-venom-poison" cluster, as Friedman places it.

XXV ("drugs"); XLIII ("hissing tongues"); XLVIII ("fatal draught"); and XLIX ("Lethe had passed those lips").²⁹

The fifth major cluster which Friedman treats is a "midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow" cluster. The chief function which Friedman lists for this cluster is a foreshadowing of the wife's actual death at the end of the poem. In addition, as it seems to me, this cluster reflects the husband's (that is, the sentimentalist's) excessive fear of death—in the general sense of a fear of change and in the more specific sense of a fear of the loss of love. This function of the death imagery Friedman seems somewhat to touch upon or suggest in discussing a coordinate motif to the "midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow" cluster:

The shadow imagery noted in passing serves as an associational bridge to yet another aspect of the prefiguration of death. We saw in XXX how the "crowning sun" of romanticized love apparently obliterates the shadow of death, yet the fact is that the love in the poem is undergoing the process in reverse. The wife is "A star with lurid beams" in section II, crowning "The pit of infamy," and, in III, "a star whose light is overcast."³⁰

Other overcast star and shadowed light images Friedman finds in Stanzas XX ("That, like some aged star, gleam luridly"); XXI ("She looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes"); XXII ("shadow-like" and "wavering pale"); XXIV ("cruel lovely pallor"); XXXVII ("smoky torch-flame"); XL ("lightless seas"); XLII ("Thoughts black as death . . . Like a stirred pool in sunshine"); and XLIX ("shadow-like and dry").³¹

Besides these particular shadowed light images, Friedman lists "midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow" images in Stanzas I; II

²⁹"The Jangled Harp," pp. 22-23.

³⁰Ibid., p. 23.

³¹Ibid., pp. 23-24.

("phantom-woman"); VI: XI ("dead infant"); XVII; XXIII; XXIX; XXX; XXXIX ("spectre"); XLI; XLIII; XLVI ("ghastly morning"); and XLIX ("about the middle of the night").³²

The final set of images which Friedman deals with is a "music-wave-horse-mark-on-shore" set. The first of these images--the music image--is only very loosely related to the other images, and the whole group of images--as Friedman treats them--do not form an image "cluster" in the same sense as do most of the images we have discussed thus far. What Friedman is really considering here, as far as Modern Love is concerned, is only the very complex set of images which occur in the last four lines of the poem:

In tragic hints here see what evermore
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

Friedman's interpretation of these lines is a highly significant one and is discussed in full detail on page 191; but for the time being it may be sufficient to say that he sees the "music-wave-horse-mark-on-shore" images as expressing "the ultimate wisdom achieved by the husband" in the poem.³³

The music imagery itself, however, which Friedman specifically cites here, does not occur in Modern Love at all, but instead in other Meredith poems such as Youth in Memory where similar wave-horse-mark-on-shore images occur, and where the conceptual meaning is somewhat more explicitly stated. Friedman also calls attention to the central music metaphor in "The Promise in Disturbance," the thematic sonnet which Meredith prefixed to

³²"The Jangled Harp," p. 23 (Friedman does not mention here the "buried" and "midnight" images which occur in L).

³³Ibid., p. 13.

Modern Love in the 1892 edition. Commenting on the music imagery in

"The Promise in Disturbance," Friedman writes:

The love whose death Modern Love so minutely chronicles was once as music (harmony) aspiring to the throne of wisdom. "One false tone" (sentimentalism) was sounded, and the "golden harp" gave out "a jangled strain," which revolted from harmony as Lucifer revolted from God. "But listen in the thought" (the mind's ear), adds the poet, and you will hear the "Conception of a newly-added chord" in the spirit ("space beyond where ear has home").³⁴

Friedman then further elaborates on the meaning carried by these images by reference to still another group of music images in Martin's Puzzle, where Martin, a cobbler, meditates on the evil fortune that has befallen a sweet and charitable young lass of his acquaintance, and concludes that "discord, though discord alone,/ Can be harmony when the notes properly fit" (p. 180)--in other words, that

suffering has its place in the total scheme of things; one must not look upon Evil alone, for Life and Death are as much a part of one transcendent whole as is our breathing in and out (p. 357), and Evil belongs in its context as companion to Good. In that context it is transmuted.³⁵

In all of this commentary on music images in other poems, however, Friedman fails to note two music images which do actually occur in Modern Love itself, and which reflect much the same kind of discord-to-harmony progression which Friedman discusses in the comments above. Thus, in Stanza VIII the "two reed-pipes"--symbolic of egoistic sentimental love--are

coarsely stopped:
The God once filled them with his mellow breath;

³⁴"The Jangled Harp," p. 25.

³⁵Ibid. (The parenthesized page references with the Friedman quotations above are to The Poetical Works; the second reference is to a passage in A Faith on Trial, where Meredith himself compares Life and Death to a breathing in and out.)

And they were music till he flung them down,
 Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
 Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!

And then, much later, in Stanza XLVII the harmony is reestablished in the "multitudinous chatterings" of the swallows, an image which occurs in conjunction with a number of other images evoking a feeling of expansion and spiritual growth (for additional discussion, see page 176). The conceptual significance of Stanza XLVII, which I consider to be the philosophical climax of the poem, Friedman has, I think, generally missed, perhaps because much of its meaning is carried by images not frequently repeated elsewhere in the poem, whereas Friedman has, for the most part, given his closest attention to images that are frequently repeated.

To return to the "wave-horse-mark-on-shore" images in Friedman's final grouping, a further distinction may be made between the "wave-horse" combination and the "mark-on-shore" image. The "mark-on-shore" image--which, in Modern Love itself, occurs only in Stanza L ("To throw that faint thin line upon the shore")--is the part of the configuration which directly represents the "ultimate wisdom" that the husband achieves. The "wave-horse" combination, on the other hand, represents the sensual demands and turmoil of the Blood, through which the personality must win its way in order to reach the goal of a balanced integration of Blood, Brain, and Spirit.³⁶

Of these two latter images, the "horse" image also occurs only in Stanza L, whereas the "wave" image occurs quite frequently throughout the poem. Friedman does not, however, list its occurrences in the other

³⁶Cf., "The Jangled Harp," pp. 24-25; also see discussion on pp. 190-191 of the present study.

stanzas, which is understandable since he is here interested in its contribution to the "mark-on-shore" representation of "ultimate wisdom," rather than in its own immediate conceptual value.

I believe, however, that the "wave" motif is a very significant one and that it should be discussed here in its own right. Throughout the poem the core conceptual value of the "wave" motif is that of a representation of the passions or the sexual drive, although the implication is sometimes very subtle. In addition, the "wave" motif itself is sometimes subtly imaged or constructed by other rhythmic and aqueous images. Thus, in the bed scene in Stanza I, when the husband and wife nervously recoil from physical contact, "the long darkness flowed away/ With muffled pulses"; and in V, when the wife again rebuffs the husband's advances,

Eyes nurtured to be looked at scarce could see
A wave of the great waves of Destiny
Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart.

In VI, the "pulse" and "flow" images of Stanza I are repeated; and in XIII the husband conceives that "the renewed for ever of a kiss/ Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!" In XVIII, the husband, noting the "nut-brown stream" of music which "flows" from "that little screwy fiddler [in] his booth," comments that the country dancers seem to have "the secret of the bull and lamb." And in XXIV, he finds himself adoring the "cruel lovely pallor which surrounds/ [his wife's] footsteps; and the low vibrating sounds/ That come on [him], as from a magic shore." In XXIX, "A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave/ Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea"; and in XL, "Terrible Love" is discovered to have "might, even dead, half sighing to upheave/ The lightless seas of selfishness amain:/ Seas that in a man's heart have no rain/ To fall and still them." In XLII, when the husband follows the wife to her bedroom for the first time

since their estrangement, "Thoughts black as death/ Like a stirred pool in sunshine break." Stanza XLIII, the climactic stanza of the poem, is then filled with "wind-wave-breakers-ocean" imagery, obviously reflecting the couple's sexual relations of the night before, and here the conceptual value is made explicit: in tragic life, God wot,/ No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:/ We are betrayed by what is false within." Finally, in three of the four last stanzas of the poem, the ebbing, and/or balancing, of passion is reflected in "wave" imagery. Thus, in XLVII, the music of the swallows waxes "loud/ In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood/ Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood/ Expanded to the upper crimson cloud," and the husband sees "across the twilight wave/ The swan sail with her young beneath her wings"; in XLIX, he finds the wife wandering "by the ocean's moaning verge"; and in L, as previously noted, the "midnight ocean's force,/ Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse," leaves its "faint thin line upon the shore!"

A corollary to the "wave" motif is also provided by the several "shipwreck" images which occur in the poem. In IV, the husband discovers that "All other joys of life" have "suffered shipwreck with the ship,/ And [gaze] upon him sallow from the storm"; in XVI, he remembers an emotional hour in "our old shipwrecked days"; and in XX, momentarily recognizing his sexual impulses for what they are, he boasts:

The wind that fills my sails
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,
I know the devil has sufficient weight
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.

In XXXI, however, confused between the "Common Sense" attraction of his blonde Lady and the implicit sexual attraction of his former relationship with his wife, he asks himself "What's my drift?" And in XXXII, he is forced to admit that the blonde Lady's own physical attraction "Would

almost wreck the faith." In XXXIV, somewhat obscurely, he tells his wife to "Take ship! For happiness is somewhere to be had!"; and finally, in XL, torn between his new feeling for his blonde Lady and his reawakened attraction to his wife, he finds himself

Helplessly afloat,
I know not what I do, whereto I strive.
The dread that my old love may be alive
Has seized my nursling new love by the throat.

It is interesting to note that Meredith's use of wave symbolism in Modern Love is closely paralleled by his use of sea imagery in at least one of his novels. Bernard A. Brunner, in "Meredith's Symbolism: Lord Ormont and His Aminta," writes:

Shortly thereafter, his [Mathew Weyburn's] buoyancy is equated with his philosophical balance; he won't be drawn into the whirlpool of precipitate and untimely action--it will be obvious after a while that the sea can be regarded, in one sense, as the whole sexual situation testing character--and he "sails away (p. 102) by tending soberly to his duties."³⁷

Before leaving the "wave" motif, two other clarifications should perhaps be made. First, the "wave" images do represent the passions, and not sensualism; and in Meredith's view, the passions, or impulses of the blood, are a necessary part of the human personality, whereas sensualism is, specifically, the selfish demand for a gratification of passion, regardless of the exigencies or consequences involved in a given interpersonal relationship. And second, the husband's use of "wave" imagery does not involve any significant distortion as does the use of "fall," "pit," and "underworld" imagery to represent his sensualism and his misconception of his wife. Although the husband does not always recognize his passions as such, the "wave" imagery per se is neither ideal nor pejorative--it is

³⁷NCF, VIII (1953), 127.

simply an accurate imagistic representation of a reality--and, in fact, the husband, throughout the poem, applies the "wave" imagery indiscriminately to himself and to his wife.

As previously stated, my purpose in much of the foregoing has been to outline, relatively briefly, the image clusters which Friedman treats--in order to give proper credit to Friedman; in order to make sure that the generalizations concerning them are clear; and in order to indicate certain modifications and additions that I would make to the clusters and to the generalizations. It would, of course, be possible to list other fairly elaborate image linkages throughout the poem, as I have done with the "wave-shipwreck" motif, but such other linkages can, I think, be adequately treated by cross-references within my stanza-by-stanza explication. In very large measure, I do think that Friedman has picked out the most significant repeated images for specialized study, and his observations of their conceptual value do throw light on most of the major thematic and dramatic movements of the poem. To list other such linkages at this point would be simply to confuse the impression of Friedman's contribution and to attempt, rather gratuitously, to rival his own highly sophisticated, but compressed, method of analysis and presentation.

What I shall do in the following stanza-by-stanza explication of the poem is to place Friedman's clusters and conceptions within the context of their interworkings with each other and with the other images of the poem and to clarify as I come to them all of those other images which need clarification in their own right. As indicated previously, I shall also, in this stanza-by-stanza explication, analyze and explain a number of the immediate technical characteristics of the poem as they occur in the individual stanzas or in small groupings of stanzas. Larger technical

characteristics such as the overall dramatic structure will of course be treated in separate sections of the study.

Stanza by Stanza Explication and Analysis

I

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
Dreadfully venomous to him. She lay
Stone-still, and the long darkness flowed away
With muffled pulses. Then, as midnight makes
Her giant heart of Memory and Tears
Drink the pale drug of silence, and so beat
Sleep's heavy measure, they from head to feet
Were moveless, looking through their dead black years,
By vain regret scrawled over the blank wall.
Like sculptured effigies they might be seen
Upon their marriage-tomb, the sword between;
Each wishing for the sword that severs all.

Stanza I provides both a point of departure for the subsequent action of the poem and an emblematic blueprint of that action. As Miss Wright has noted, in Stanza I "lies the poem in embryo."³⁸ It contains within its limits key elements of almost all the major image clusters which will be repeated throughout the poem, its pattern of imagery establishes the dominant oppositions on which the poem is structured, its immediate dramatic conflict is a type (a playing out in little) of the total dramatic conflict, and its figurative and symbolic language specifically foreshadows the catastrophe which will result from the total conflict.

As a point of departure for the subsequent action of the poem, Stanza I establishes the fact that the husband and wife whom it introduces have now reached that point in the disintegration of their love relationship

³⁸Elizabeth C. Wright, p. 4.

when they no longer engage in marital relations--when their fear of their own impulses, as well as their fear of rejection by the other, has become, in effect, a "sword between" them (l. 15). Yet the very fact that they do still share a "common bed" (in this first stanza) is an indication that they have not yet come to any understanding, even a tacit one, concerning the present nature of their relationship. Within the context of Stanza I, then, we are plunged into the heart of their uncertainty, when they are first discovering, as it were, the strength of the barrier between them.

Thus, in the midnight hours, the husband lies sleepless, immobile in the grip of his own vexed desires, yet keenly responsive to the muffled sobbing of a wife he is afraid to touch. In "his hand's light quiver by her head" (l. 2), we may see a quality of imperfect demand for a reestablishment of their love. A gesture in which pity and desire intermix, the movement of his hand is both a mute offer of comfort and a threat to the unspoken barrier which has been established between them. It is also, in its most conscious implications, a question as to the cause of her tears; and, in her instinctive fear of that question, in her "sharp surprise," the wife can only recoil upon herself and strangle her sobs. Especially effective, here, is the image of the "little gaping snakes," with its sensory (and psychic) connotations of recoil, of convulsion, and of tiny gaping silences which are both helpless and deadly.

The wife's strangled sobs are, of course, "venomous" to the husband--they are an index to the death of their love, a rejection of his offer of comfort, and an implicit admission of her secret guilt. Pity resolves into jealous frustration, the husband is too proud or too afraid of being rebuffed to question her further, and the almost instinctive gesture of comfort becomes in itself a denial of comfort when checked at midpoint. In

the moment of the wife's instinctive recoil, the quiver of sympathy has passed, and each is thrust back upon himself. Each knows that the barrier between them has been tacitly recognized, but neither can nor will speak. In their enforced rigidity, their pulse beats seem objectified in the throbbing darkness which "flows away" as their tension (the extreme tension created by their previous convulsive movements) subsides toward the drugged numbness of sleep. As they lie thus motionless, both seeing, with vain regret, the dead years of their marriage "scrawled" before them, each wishes for an end to their marriage and perhaps, by emotional extension, for death--"the sword that severs all"--because neither can face the present.

In its figurative and symbolic language Stanza I foreshadows not only the final death of the marriage (the death of love) but also the actual death of the wife. Line 10, "Drink the pale drug of silence," foreshadows as well the means of her death--i.e., that she will die by drinking poison; and line 8 foreshadows the hour of her death--"midnight." The midnight-darkness imagery will be repeated and reinforced throughout the poem, as will the death-graveyard imagery established here by "dead black years," "sculptured effigies," and "marriage-tomb." Other important clusters initiated in Stanza I are the serpent-venom-poison cluster and, less obviously, the ocean-wave cluster. As Miss Wright indicates, the suggestion of the ocean in "the long darkness flowed away/ With muffled pulses" is subtly reinforced by the images "sobs" and "Tears"--the "Tears" being directly associated with the giant heart of midnight, and thus, by indirection, with the long darkness which flows away.³⁹

³⁹Cf., Elizabeth C. Wright, pp. 4-5.

Also, by a rather involved pattern of transferences, we may see that the barrier between them in Stanza I (symbolized by "the sword between") has, in point of dramatic fact, resulted from the first thrustings of "that fatal knife,/ Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole"--mentioned in Stanza L--and that the fatal knife, the deep questioning, as it probes more and more deeply, becomes an instrument of death--that it becomes, in fact, "the sword that severs all," which each desires in Stanza I. Finally, we may see in such images as "muffled pulses" and "beat/ Sleep's heavy measure" at least a suggestion of the time-torpor motif which will carry throughout the poem.⁴⁰

The dominant oppositions established in Stanza I are those of the past and the present, of wakefulness and sleep, of movement and stillness, and--underlying all these--the fundamental opposition of life and death.⁴¹ In Modern Love all of these oppositions are subtly related--and peculiarly conditioned--by the sentimentalist's attitude toward Time. Because the sentimentalist demands for his love relationship an ideal permanence over and above natural change, he is unable to come to terms with either his past or his present when the conditions of his relationship are altered by inevitable change. Thus the couple in Modern Love--who "fed not on the advancing hours," as we are told in Stanza L--find themselves alternately regretting the past, the "dead black years" which have been killed by the present betrayal of love, and just as vainly seeking to recapture the past

⁴⁰Stanza I contains, then, representatives of five of the six major image clusters which Friedman analyzes in the poem--the clusters which I have listed on pp. 13-14 and discussed and amplified in some detail on pp. 41-56. The only one of Friedman's major image clusters not represented in Stanza I is the snare-bat-cage-pit-beast cluster, which will be introduced in Stanza II.

⁴¹Cf., Elizabeth C. Wright, p. 4.

(the exact conditions of their lost love) because they cannot face the present.

Jarred loose from their past--from their dream of an ideal permanence for love, they exist either in a state of hypersensitive wakefulness ("I must have slept, since now I wake," as the husband says in Stanza X) or else they subside into a state of drugged numbness (the kind of sleep imaged in Stanza I) because their wakefulness is not in reality a new or productive awareness, but only an insomniac's abnormal inability to sleep--to return to his dreams. Similarly their movements tend to be not movements at all, but only convulsions from and to a dead center of rigidity. And it need hardly be added that their life ceases to be living at all, but becomes instead a kind of death--created by an abnormal fear of death (the terms life and death are used here in a somewhat figurative sense, but the life and death of their love does have a philosophical, as well as an emotional, relationship to actual life and death).

As a consequence of their distorted view of Time, as Friedman writes, "the entire poem is pervaded by a thick and heavy atmosphere of sultry immobility, of frozen will and suspended desire."⁴² Having denied Time, having denied an ever-changing present, the couple in Modern Love have denied themselves the consolation of the future; having denied for their love the possibility of death, they have also denied for it the possibility of rebirth.

In Stanza I, we have seen a type--an acting out in little--of their total dramatic conflict: "imperfect demand and pathetic dumbness"⁴³ will

⁴²"The Jangled Harp," p. 14.

⁴³Cavazza, p. VI.

remain to baffle them from first to last.

Line 15. the sword between. In medieval romances, chastity between lovers was insured by placing a naked sword between them.⁴⁴ An ironic contrast to this use of the sword symbol in Modern Love is provided by a stanza from a poem which Meredith, according to Lionel Stevenson, apparently wrote during his honeymoon trip to the Rhineland immediately following his marriage to Mary Ellen Nicolls, the widowed daughter of Thomas Love Peacock:

No longer severing our embrace
Was Night a sword between us;
But richest mystery robed in grace
To lock us close, and screen us.⁴⁵

II

It ended, and the morrow brought the task.
Her eyes were guilty gates, that let him in
By shutting all too zealous for their sin:
Each sucked a secret, and each wore a mask.
But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!
He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers:
A languid humour stole among the hours,
And if their smiles encountered, he went mad,
And raged deep inward, till the light was brown
Before his vision, and the world, forgot,
Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot.
A star with lurid beams, she seemed to crown
The pit of infamy: and then again
He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
To ape the magnanimity of love,
And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

The night, with its tortured hours of tacit discovery, ends, and the next day brings the task--not only the task of carrying on normal household affairs, but the heavier burden of keeping hidden the painful knowledge that each has gained of the other in the midnight hours. Each 'sucks

⁴⁴Classical allusions and other such phrases in any given stanza which require footnoting but not analytical discussion will be identified by line number and explained in notes such as this one inserted into the text immediately following the detailed discussion of that stanza.

⁴⁵Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith, p. 30.

his secret' (like a nagging tooth) behind a mask a cordiality, but the wife's beauty is sickening to the husband because of the very strength of his desire for her.

Again the element of Time enters. As we have noted in previous quotations from Friedman, a counterweight to the heavy atmosphere of sultry immobility throughout the poem is provided by the game-motif, which functions as vehicle of the couple's nervous frustration seeking an outlet:

Since the sentimentalist cannot incorporate the fact of change into his scheme of values, his behavior resolves ultimately into a kind of manic-depressive shift: sometimes he is sunk under an oppressive cloud, sometimes he is gay and superficial--all in an effort to gloss over the reality of the situation.⁴⁶

Although the game-motif does not enter explicitly here, and although Friedman himself does not apply his generalization to the present stanza, we have in Stanza II a peculiar example of both manic and depressive symptoms suggested within the context of only a few brief lines. The key to this double-suggestiveness lies in the use of the word "humour" in line 7 (the first of a number of instances in which Meredith makes highly effective use of the possible multiple denotations of a single word or phrase). Here humour may denote both a miasmic atmosphere, the kind of atmosphere already established in the previous line by the phrase "at breath of poison-flowers," and a capricious gaiety, the latter meaning being reinforced in the next line by the word "smiles." The irony implicit in this double use of the word humour is of course obvious, and a somewhat similar irony may be noted in the phrase "if their smiles encountered"--where the violence of the verb encountered denies any true cordiality in the smiles.

⁴⁶"The Jangled Harp," p. 15.

After this brief hint at the sporadic surface gaiety of the scene--the appearance which each keeps up before the other--Stanza II comes of course to focus more and more on the depressive shifts of the husband's inner mood. Although in later stanzas (for example, in XVII), he is able to derive a kind of cynical pleasure from the surface hypocrisy (even in the moments when he recognizes it as such), he is, in Stanza II, still much too close to his initial disillusionment not to be enraged by his wife's smiles. And here we come, perhaps, to a third and even more basic meaning for the word humour: in the poisonous atmosphere created by his wife's beauty (or more exactly by his own still-violent sexual impulses) the yellow bile of his anger and the black bile of his depression combine, until the light is "brown/ Before his vision, and the world, forgot,/ Looked wicked as some old dull murder-spot." What is "forgot" is of course the true nature of the situation, as it would appear if not colored by his own projected emotion.

The term "dull murder-spot" (besides reinforcing--with its implications of dried blood--the 'brown light' coloration of the preceding lines) picks up and further establishes the murder-knife-wound-blood motif, briefly prefigured in Stanza I by the "sword" image. As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the sentimentalist, having conceived of Love as capable of an ideal permanence over and above the facts of natural change, tends to conceive of its loss only in terms of an act of violence--of an act of deliberate malice on the part of the love partner.

Another important sub-cluster initiated in Stanza II is the overcast-star motif. In its most positive usage, the star is Meredith's symbol for permanent value (for the immortal element in nature with which man can

align himself through selfless love).⁴⁷ In a derivative but less positive usage, however, the star is a symbol of romantic love, which the sentimentalist conceives of as permanent, but which has no absolute efficacy. Thus, as Friedman explains, the "crowning sun" of romanticized love (a related image) "apparently obliterates the shadow of death [in XXX], yet the fact is that the love in the poem is undergoing the process in reverse."⁴⁸ That is, the romantic love is itself dying and its dying is repeatedly symbolized by the overcast-star motif.

To a degree, of course, the "star" image serves a double function, symbolizing both, in a general sense, romantic love as an ideal entity and, more directly, the husband's conception of the wife herself as a pure and constant helpmate. And once the wife's constancy has been called into question, the light which emanates from her becomes not only overcast, but sinister and shocking—as implied by the secondary connotation of "lurid"—and she seems to crown "the pit of infamy." The "pit of infamy" itself is of course largely a projection of the husband's own ambivalent sexual feelings. Unable, because of her defection, any longer to justify his desire for her as love, he must now reject it as lust and fear her as a temptress.

Caught thus between his anger and his desire, the husband yet attempts to "behave well," an essentially modern repression which immeasurably increases the tension. C. Day Lewis, in The Poetic Image, suggests the comparison with Othello,⁴⁹ who could, at least as long as he was

⁴⁷For an example of this usage, see An Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn (p. 65).

⁴⁸"The Jangled Harp," p. 23.

⁴⁹London, 1947, p. 102.

convinced of his wife's infidelity, turn his rage outward, whereas the husband in Modern Love can only "ape the magnanimity of love" and smite himself, "a shuddering heap of pain."

In the phrase "ape the magnanimity of love," Meredith again makes highly effective use of the double meaning of a word to strike a final note of irony in Stanza II. Thus, enraged in the sensual side of his nature by his wife's beauty, the husband strives to imitate the generosity of a higher, more spiritual kind of love, yet the word ape, in its animal denotation, itself suggests the bestial side of man's nature.⁵⁰

III

This was the woman; what now of the man?
 But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,
 He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,
 Or, being callous, haply till he can.
 But he is nothing:—nothing? Only mark
 The rich light striking out from her on him!
 Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim
 Across the man she singles, leaving dark
 All else! Lord God, who mad'st the thing so fair,
 See that I am drawn to her even now!
 It cannot be such harm on her cool brow
 To put a kiss? Yet if I meet him there!
 But she is mine! Ah, no! I know too well
 I claim a star whose light is overcast:
 I claim a phantom-woman in the Past.
 The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!

Having introduced the wife's character ("This was the woman"), the poet (or objective narrator of the first two stanzas) now turns to a consideration of the other man in the triangle, the rival on whom the wife had looked with favor, but the mere thought of this other man is enough to

⁵⁰Both "ape" and "pit" in this stanza are representative of the snare-bat-cage-pit-beast cluster, the only one of the major image clusters which Friedman lists not represented in Stanza I. In general terms, as indicated previously, this cluster is expressive of the husband's sensualism.

elicit from him an exclamation of scorn: "But pass him. If he comes beneath a heel,/ He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,/ Or, being callous, haply till he can." This outburst of emotion he tries to quell by persuading himself that the man is "nothing," but in the process he suddenly "marks" again the irradiating power of his wife's gaze as her eyes "swim" across the man she has singled for her love.

Before proceeding further we should note that within these first few lines of Stanza III a peculiar but highly dramatic shift in point of view occurs, whose complex turnings we must now try to trace. Thus, the speaker of line 1 we recognize without question as the objective narrator of the first two stanzas; but when, in line 2, this objective narrator loses his emotional "objectivity" at the mere thought of the other man, we immediately identify, more or less consciously, this objective narrator with the husband of the poem--that is, we are given the feeling that the objective narrator is the husband and if we are logically to account for this "shift," we must assume that the narrator all along has been the husband, who up to this point has been "remembering" his past experience and attempting to record it "objectively" (in the third person and in the past tense), but who now is betrayed into a first person, present tense, interior monologue exclamation by the thought of the other man. This "shift," however, is only part of the whole shift. Thus, even though the husband, in lines 2-4, speaks in the present tense of what he would like to do to the other man: "If he comes beneath a heel,/ He shall be crushed until he cannot feel,/ Or being callous, haply till he can," he is not in these lines necessarily speaking in the "present tense" (in the immediate time context) of the action of the poem itself. And it is only, perhaps, when he starts to consider whether the other man is really "nothing," and "remembers" the

"rich light" of the wife's gaze on the other man, and from thence, the "rich light" of her gaze on him, that he is "drawn back" into the action of the poem, and begins to "relive" it at some specific point within the action--a point, as we may imagine, only a short time, though perhaps a few days, after the midnight discovery of the loss of the wife's love in Stanza I.

The whole shift, then, involves (1) an identification of the objective narrator with the husband narrator; (2) a shift from past tense narration--from the vantage of some unspecified time beyond the action of the poem--to interior monologue, present tense exclamation--but still in a time context beyond the action; and (3) a shift within the interior monologue from a "general" memory and emotional reaction to the "thought" of the other man, to specific memories of the wife's gaze irradiating the other man and of the wife's gaze irradiating himself, and hence to a coherent "reliving" of the experience from a specific moment during the time when he was first aware of the wife's attraction to the other man--all of these various shifts taking place of course confusedly, and seemingly almost simultaneously, which is a fair approximation of the way the mind really works, and which is highly effective dramatically in the present case.⁵¹

At the point in the action where Stanza III finally comes to focus, as indicated in line 9, the husband, still intensely aware of the wife's beauty and still drawn to her, tries to convince himself that there can be little harm in a kiss upon her brow, yet is withheld by the fear that

⁵¹For a discussion of Meredith's peculiar treatment of point of view as it operates throughout the whole of Modern Love, see pp. 242-251.

the other man may also have kissed that "cool brow." He tries to tell himself that she is still his, but knows too well that the consecration which clothed their past love no longer exists. For the moment at least, and somewhat belatedly, he recognizes the inexorable wheeling of Time:

"The hour has struck, though I heard not the bell!"

In its imagery, Stanza III picks up the overcast-star sub-cluster from Stanza II; the death-grave cluster from Stanza I (in "phantom-woman,"); and of course the time-torpor motif from Stanzas I and II (in "The hour has struck," etc.). Also, in the husband's expression of repugnance for the other man, "If he comes beneath a heel," there is perhaps a faint echo of the snake-venom-poison motif. The line itself is of course a more direct echo of the biblical injunction to Satan in the form of the serpent: "It [her seed] shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel" (Genesis 3. 15).⁵²

IV

All other joys of life he strove to warm,
And magnify, and catch them to his lip:
But they had suffered shipwreck with the ship,
And gazed upon him fallow from the storm.
Or if Delusion came, 'twas but to show
The coming minute mock the one that went.
Cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent,
Stood high Philosophy, less friend than foe:
Whom self-caged Passion, from its prison-bars,
Is always watching with a wondering hate.
Not till the fire is dying in the grate,
Look we for any kinship with the stars.
Oh, wisdom never comes when it is gold,
And the great price we pay for it full worth:
We have it only when we are half earth.
Little avails that coinage to the old!

⁵²The other man alluded to in Stanza III will appear in only a very shadowy role in subsequent action. The question of the degree of the wife's intimacy with him (briefly raised in the line "Yet if I meet him there") is--intentionally, I think--left ambiguous throughout the poem.

With the loss of any satisfaction in his relationship with his wife, he attempts to turn to other pleasures for relief, but they too have palled in the general wreckage of his marriage (The shipwreck image in line 3 is, as indicated earlier, a corollary of the wave motif, which is itself expressive of the passions--the passions, in turn, being understood as capable of "wrecking" a love relationship if they are not properly recognized and controlled). In the midst of this wreckage, if for a moment he deludes himself into thinking that the past love relationship is recoverable, it is but to see the delusion shattered in the coming moment and to feel his loss even more painfully as a result of the momentary contrast.

Philosophy, too, is no consolation, but stands cold and aloof, appearing as the enemy of his "self-caged Passion." Here, however, we need to see exactly what Meredith means by "Philosophy" and by "self-caged" passion. "Stars," when used in the plural sense as in lines 7 and 12, are, I believe, Meredith's symbols for the intellect or brain, the second part of the triad of Blood, Brain, and Spirit" (cf., Lucifer in Starlight--"the stars,/ Which are the brain of heaven," p. 182). And for Meredith, as indicated in lines 11 and 12 of this stanza, Brain cannot fully dominate the individual until the demands of the Blood have subsided with age. As a further example of this point, we might compare lines 11 and 12 with the following lines from The Woods of Westernmain:

'Tis enough: the name of Sage
 Hits no thing in nature, nought;
 Man the least, save when grave Age
 From yon Dragon guards his thought.
 (p. 199)

Although Friedman does not relate this passage to the situation in Stanza IV, in a chapter devoted to The Woods of Westernmain in his doctoral

dissertation, Friedman identifies the "Dragon" image as Meredith's symbol for the "Self" or "Egoism."⁵³

The above line of reasoning, as reflected in Stanza IV and in The Woods of Westermain, does not mean, however, that a working balance between the demands of Blood and Brain is impossible short of senility: it is only when the individual is caught in the snare of Egoism (i.e., it is only when his passion is "self-caged") that he sees Blood and Brain at irrevocable war with one another. Snare-bat-cage-pit-beast imagery, it may be remembered from our introductory discussion, is used throughout Modern Love to express the husband's sensualism, and sensualism itself is one of the alternate forms of Egoism. Like the other forms, such as sentimentalism, it amounts to an excessive demand for self-gratification from nature and/or an excessive demand for exemption from natural pain.

By way of contrast and correction to the sentimentalist-sensualist's line of reasoning as reflected in Stanza IV, in the Ode to the Comic Spirit, Meredith speaks of the Comic Spirit as follows:

They learn that thou art not of alien sort,
Speaking the tongue by vipers hissed,
Or of the frosty heights unscaled.
(p. 401)

In other words, the wisdom that man needs to live by lies neither in a pure and unscathed "Philosophy" divorced from passion--which can come only with age--nor in unbridled passion itself, in sensualism, but instead it lies in a day by day struggle and interaction between Blood and Brain which may be at times extremely painful to the individual ego, but which is never a cause for final despair.

⁵³"The Fire of Renewal," pp. 381-383

C. Day Lewis speaks of Meredith's power of poetic generalization, as especially evidenced in lines 11-16 of this stanza, as follows:

And the result is a poetry of true wisdom, wisdom that speaks out, as Shakespeare's did, in great, flashing, transfigured platitudes. . . . It is not originality, still less idiosyncrasy of thought, which renders this passage memorable. It is a commonplace, whose force we are at last made to feel, through and through, by the inner conviction and the expressive grandeur of its utterance.⁵⁴

I agree with Day Lewis that these lines do have the ring and stamp of truth about them--that they strike a responsive chord in all of us, but like so many of the platitudes in life itself, like so many of our "great truths," these lines express only a half-truth, and Meredith, like Shakespeare, is nearly always aware of the half-truth of such utterances, and consciously uses them--as is the case here--for purposes of characterization. Thus, though the husband's despair in the face of the struggle between passion and intelligence may strike a responsive chord in all of us, it would be a morbid despair which could see no value in such a struggle and no hope for a satisfactory balance between the two. "Wisdom"--in the sense of the wisdom of the Sage, divorced from passion--may never come until "we are half earth," but it is cynicism which sees that kind of wisdom as the only alternative to sensualism. Thus, despite the legitimate power of the utterance, the husband is here, as Friedman also notes,⁵⁵ gravitating toward the cynicism which he will recurringly feel through most of the rest of the poem.

Technically, the point of view in Stanza IV shifts back to objective narration, but again it is an objective narration emanating from a single

⁵⁴Day Lewis, "Introduction," p. xxvi.

⁵⁵"The Fire of Renewal," p. 340.

intelligence (rather than from a roving or omniscient intelligence), and again the present tense authorial comments interspersing the narration tend to reflect the protagonist's moods at the time of the action--in other words, the point of view continues to be generally identifiable as the husband's point of view.

V

A message from her set his brain aflame.
 A world of household matters filled her mind,
 Wherein he saw hypocrisy designed:
 She treated him as something that is tame,
 And but at other provocation bites.
 Familiar was her shoulder in the glass,
 Through that dark rain: yet it may come to pass
 That a changed eye finds such familiar sights
 More keenly tempting than new loveliness.
 The 'What has been' a moment seemed his own:
 The splendors, mysteries, dearer because known,
 Nor less divine: Love's inmost sacredness
 Called to him, 'Come!'--In his restraining start,
 Eyes nurtured to be looked at scarce could see
 A wave of the great waves of Destiny
 Convulsed at a checked impulse of the heart.

The basic narrative implications (and indeed the precise setting) of Stanza V seem never to have been very adequately explicated. Friedman, in his dissertation, sees the wife, at least in part of the stanza, as beckoning to the husband from a window⁵⁶--a misinterpretation, as I see it, of the image "her shoulder in the glass"--and most other critics have simply mentioned the "shoulder in the glass" image without definitely clarifying its meaning.⁵⁷ Miss Wright, in passing, does identify the "dark rain" image of line 7 as the wife's "hair seen in the mirror,"⁵⁸ but does not expatiate further on this particular stanza.

⁵⁶"The Fire of Renewal," pp. 340-341.

⁵⁷See, for example, Cavazza, p. VIII.

⁵⁸Elizabeth C. Wright, p. 7.

The setting, as I take it, is the wife's dressing-room--a locale specifically identified in Stanza VII--and the message referred to in line 1 is a simple request, conveyed by a maid or other member of the household, that the husband should come to the dressing-room. That such a simple request is capable of setting his brain "afire" can be explained, then, only by the unnaturalness of the relationship that now exists between them. Although in Stanza I they still share a "common bed," the implications are that marital relations have ceased, and in later stanzas (e.g., XXIII, XLII, and XLIX) the implications are that the couple no longer share the same bedroom; thus in Stanza V we may suppose that the husband has become so infrequent a visitor to his wife's dressing room that the mere request to come there might be sufficient to inflame his mind (with the hope perhaps that the wife's request indicates a willingness on her part to renew their intimacy).

As it happens, however, she wishes only to discuss routine household matters, an interest which--in the face of her obvious defection as a wife--strikes him as false and unnatural. It is also part of the wife's "hypocrisy" (perhaps only partly conscious) that she fails to recognize sex as a motive in their relationship at all, that she fails to recognize the power that her physical beauty still has on him. Thus, as she sits before her mirror, she treats him "as something that is tame"--fearing neither a forceful attempt to renew their intimacy, the kind of bestial assault which he himself occasionally fears (as in IX), nor any act of vengeance (as by the "Poet's black stage-lion" of Stanza XV), though she knows that he may "at other provocation" bite, a reference, I think, to his sardonic, freezing wit, the kind of "civilized" mental cruelty he shows himself capable of in XXXIV.

For her husband, however, the familiar sight of her shoulder in the glass, through the "dark rain" of her hair (cf. "the shower of loosened hair," Stanza XIII), is made all the more poignantly tempting as a result of their recent estrangement, and for a moment "Delusion" comes (cf. Stanza IV, line 5) and the "'What has been'" seems his again. All of her physical beauty, "dearer because known," and all that had been most lovely and sacred in their relationship draws him to her, yet the impulse is checked by the blankness of her eyes--"Eyes nurtured to be looked at," which can discern, in their habitual vanity, neither the intensity of his desire as he admires her beauty, nor (in their self-absorption) the convulsion of his heart as he turns away. Once again imperfect demand is met by dumbness, and, as Friedman notes ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 341), the coming minute mocks the one that went (cf. IV).

VI

It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool.
 She had no blush, but slanted down her eye.
 Shamed nature, then, confesses love can die:
 And most she punishes the tender fool
 Who will believe what honours her the most!
 Dead! is it dead? She has a pulse, and flow
 Of tears, the price of blood-drops, as I know,
 For whom the midnight sobs around Love's ghost,
 Since then I heard her, and so will sob on.
 The love is here; it has but changed its aim.
 O bitter barren woman! what's the name?
 The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?
 Behold me striking the world's coward stroke!
 That will I not do, though the sting is dire.
 --Beneath the surface this, while by the fire
 They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.

When, by chance, he does kiss her "cool brow" (cf. III), she recognizes the caress without warmth and merely averts her eyes. "Shamed nature," then, admits that love can die, thus punishing most severely the one who will believe "what honours her (nature) the most"--that is, the ideal of

romantic love. As Friedman suggests ("The Fire of Renewal, p. 341), a note of cynicism enters here, the husband over-reacting against the loss of his sentimental ideal in his accusation of the natural processes, while at the same time indulging in pity for himself as "the tender fool."

Just as in Stanza III, Meredith in this section shades almost imperceptibly into interior monologue, beginning the stanza with objective narration in the past tense, then shifting to what seems to be a present tense authorial comment by the objective narrator but more or less obviously tinged with the protagonist's emotions (lines 3-5), and then continuing the argument in what emerges as an interior monologue in the mind of the husband at the time of the action (lines 6 and following).

In his interior argument, the husband cannot believe that all love is dead in her: he knows that she is still capable of deep feeling, for he has heard her sobbing in the midnight hours, as narrated in Stanza I. The imagery of lines 6 through 9, which for the most part echoes that of Stanza I, is extremely complex, for it contains as well as the Stanza I imagery of "pulse," "flow," "sobs," "tears," "midnight," and "ghost," the additional image of "blood-drops." The "blood-drops" image is a part of the murder-knife-wound-blood cluster, which Friedman sees as expressing the husband's "disillusionment" and "cynicism," and which I have further defined as reflecting the distortion in the sentimentalist's conception of the partner's role in the love relationship—that is, as reflecting the sentimentalist's tendency to see the love partner as a deliberate murderer of love when the love relationship begins to disintegrate (see previous discussion, pp. 44-45). This particular meaning is, I think, emphasized in a similar occurrence of the blood-drops image in Stanza XXVI. In that stanza, blood-drops result from the wounding of the "eagle" of Love, the

"red drops" being "the links of a harsh chain,/ Binding him to the ground with narrow range." And in the last two lines of that stanza, when the "eagle" has turned into a "serpent," the husband admonishes the wife: "be no coward:--you that made Love bleed,/ You must bear all the venom of his tooth!"

In Stanza VI, then, the wife's "tears" (at least as the husband conceives of them) are the just "price" she pays for killing their love, "For whom (i.e., for which crime) the midnight sobs around Love's ghost," as it has sobbed since the night he heard her crying, and as it will "sob on." This interpretation of "blood-drops" is significant, I think, since it points up the husband's self-righteous lack of pity for the wife's suffering (in the present instance) as well as his own sentimentalized self-pity, both of which are generally reflected in the diction and tone of the passage, but neither of which come through very precisely simply in a cursory reading.

Knowing that her capacity for love still exists and that it has merely changed its direction, the husband, overcome by his bitterness, is tempted to denounce her as a whore--"what's the name?/ The name, the name, the new name thou hast won?"--but restrains himself as he realizes that this is "the world's coward stroke," the stock defense-mechanism of injured masculine pride.

Despite the frenzy of his thoughts, the festive surface-pretence goes on, as ironically pointed up by the shift back to past tense, objective narration in the last two lines:

--Beneath the surface this, while by the fire
They sat, she laughing at a quiet joke.

VII

She issues radiant from her dressing-room,
 Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere:
 --By stirring up a lower, much I fear!
 How deftly that oiled barber lays his bloom!
 That long-shanked dapper Cupid with frisked curls
 Can make known women torturingly fair;
 The gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair
 Awakes beneath his magic whisks and twirls.
 His art can take the eyes from out my head,
 Until I see with eyes of other men;
 While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,
 And sends a spark up:--is it true we are wed?
 Yeal filthiness of body is most vile,
 But faithlessness of heart I do hold worse.
 The former, it were not so great a curse
 To read on the steel-mirror of her smile.

When she issues from her dressing-room, looking radiantly beautiful, for a moment he sees her in her former idealized role, as his angel-comforter--"Like one prepared to scale an upper sphere," but immediately his distrust of her returns and he sees her not as a "cherisher-comforter" but in her "polar-aspect" as [an] enslaver-betrayer." The polar-terms, here, it may be remembered from our earlier discussion of the snake-venom-poison cluster (pp. 47-48), are adopted by Friedman from Maud Bodkins's Archetypal Patterns in Poetry. As Friedman indicates, "our wishes color what we see in such a way that the objects of perception often seem to mirror our own internal states."⁵⁹ Thus the husband of the poem tends to see his wife as a projection of his own unreconciled impulses--seeing her at one moment, in a sentimental sublimation of his own sexual desires, as an angel-comforter, and at the next moment, in a fearful projection of his own sensualism, as a deliberate temptress, intent upon holding him gratuitously captive by "stirring up a lower" sphere.

⁵⁹"The Jangled Harp," pp. 20-21.

In the husband's present projected fantasy, even his wife's hairdresser takes on a sinister (though somewhat humorous) aspect, becoming an "oiled barber"—half-satyr and half-cupid with his "long shanks" and "frisked curls"—whose "art" can make "known women torturingly fair," as he awakes beneath the "magic whisks and twirls" of his brush the "gold-eyed serpent dwelling in rich hair."

The hairdresser's art can, in fact, make him "see with eyes of other men"—an image which, together with the image of "known women" made "torturingly fair" in line 6, recalls the "changed eye" of Stanza V, which finds "such familiar sights/ More keenly tempting than new loveliness." In Stanza V, however, the vision of her loveliness led to at least a momentary illusion that the "What has been" was still his own, whereas in Stanza VII, he is immediately brought up short by his "knowledge" of the truth of the situation—"is it true we are wed?" Despite the ambiguous syntax and punctuation of this section, I think the significant implied answer to this question is in the negative--No, they are no longer wed in the spiritual sense. As the last four lines of the stanza indicate, although he does not at this point judge her guilty of bodily infidelity, her spiritual betrayal of their love—as reflected in her cold and unresponsive "smile"—is an even more unbearable crime than mere physical frailty would have been.

Although I have here spelled out what I believe to be a correct unraveling of the conceptual pattern of Stanza VII, the emotional pattern is, I think, more intentionally ambiguous. Indeed, frustrated sensualism and pained idealism are almost inextricably mixed throughout the last six lines. Thus, although the husband does not accuse the wife of bodily infidelity in these lines, the violence of his distaste—"Yea! filthiness

of body is most vile"—almost certainly stems from the intensity of his own sensual imagination. This tangled interweaving of sensualism and idealism is, I think, especially well-expressed in the transition image of lines 11-12—"While deeper knowledge crouches in its den,/ And sends a spark up"—where "crouches" and "den" are obvious beast-image symbols of sensualism (snare-bat-cage-pit-beast cluster) and "knowledge" and "spark" are obvious symbols of intelligence and aspiration. It is almost as though some prehistoric man-beast were squatting on the floor of his cave striking the first flints together to start the first fire--the traditional symbol of knowledge. And indeed, that such an involved metaphor might not be alien to Meredith's thought is perhaps evidenced by the opening lines of Stanza XXX: "What are we first? First animals; and next/ Intelligences at a leap."

VIII

Yet it was plain she struggled, and that salt
 Of righteous feeling made her pitiful.
 Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful!
 Where came the cleft between us? whose the fault?
 My tears are on thee, that have rarely dropped
 As balm for any bitter wound of mine:
 My breast will open for thee at a sign!
 But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
 The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
 And they were music till he flung them down,
 Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
 Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!
 I do not know myself without thee more:
 In this unholy battle I grow base:
 If the same soul be under the same face,
 Speak, and a taste of that old time restore!

After the first two lines, which are third person, past tense narration, the point of view in Stanza VIII again shifts to first person, present tense interior monologue. In contrast to the bitterness of the preceding stanza, the dominant feeling in Stanza VIII is that of pity.

Able, for the moment, to see beyond himself, the husband recognizes that the wife too is struggling with her desires and that she suffers not simply for what she wants--the other man, but for what she has lost, that her tears are tears of guilt, that they are the "salt," the cleansing preservative,⁶⁰ of what had been of value in their relationship.

He still sees her in her double aspect--"Poor twisting worm, so queenly beautiful"--but the adverse image is much softened now, for the "twisting worm" is as much pitiful victim as betrayer. Indeed he is no longer sure "whose the fault," and in this stanza is willing, on a conscious level, to withhold judgment and to share her suffering along with his own. His "tears" are on her, and he makes the point that his tears "have rarely dropped/ As balm for any bitter wound of mine." The bitter wound image, however, as indicated in my "A Survey and Analysis of Previous Criticism" chapter, demands special attention here. In that chapter (see pp. 12-13 and 15-19) I proposed that much of the imagery of Modern Love tends to operate on two different levels--one a conceptual and symbolic level and the other an emotional and connotative level; and I further proposed that the conceptual level tends to reflect the husband's underlying or "sub-conscious" conceptions and that the emotional and connotative level tends to reflect his conscious moods and emotions. In the present stanza, then, we have an example where the two levels of meaning are diametrically opposed. Thus, as indicated in the earlier discussion and as we have just seen in the present discussion, the husband's conscious feeling in Stanza VIII is that of pity for the wife. But, as Friedman indicates, the "bitter"

⁶⁰I am indebted to Friedman, "The Fire of Renewal," p. 342, for the idea of "salt" as a preservative, although he uses this interpretation of the image in a somewhat different context.

image is part of the snake-venom-poison cluster,⁶¹ while the "wound" image is part of the murder-knife-wound-blood cluster. And the very presence of this bitter wound imagery, along with the ambivalent twisting worm-queenly beautiful imagery, in Stanza VIII is an indication that the husband's underlying or "subconscious" conception of the wife has not changed, however sincerely sympathetic of her suffering he may be on a conscious level in this stanza, and however sincerely less concerned he may be for his own pain at the present time.

To return now to the other imagery of Stanza VIII, the point that his tears "have rarely dropped/ As balm for any bitter wound of mine" is a significant one--that is, the wounds to the selfish ego, to the selfish sentimental demands of the individual, do not call forth the quiet tears of pity which may act as a balm and which do have preservative power. The significance of this distinction is further pointed up in Stanza XLIV, where the husband, looking back over most of the action reflected in the poem, comments:

Poor soul! if, in those early days unkind,
Thy power to sting had been but power to grieve,
We now might with an equal spirit meet,
And not be matched like innocence and vice.

All too often in these early stanzas her power is to sting and not to grieve, but for the moment she has touched him beyond his ego, and his breast is ready to open for her "at a sign."

Although no sign is forthcoming, he does not, in this instance, sink to a mocking cynicism, but rises instead to a tragic despair in which grief is shared and the dignity and beauty of the thing lost is positively affirmed:

⁶¹"The Jangled Harp," p. 22.

But, no: we are two reed-pipes, coarsely stopped:
 The God once filled them with his mellow breath;
 And they were music till he flung them down,
 Used! used! Hear now the discord-loving clown
 Puff his gross spirit in them, worse than death!

This moment of tragic vision is also a moment of at least partial self-recognition, and the husband realizes that already under the prolonged discord, he has begun to degenerate: "In this unholy battle I grow base." Again he pleads for a sign, this time perhaps not so much for a renewal of their relationship as simply for a renewed affirmation that the past shall continue to retain its value in the memory: "Speak, and a taste of that old time restore."

Line 9. The God. Apollo, god of music and poetry.

IX

He felt the wild beast in him betweenwhiles
 So masterfully rude, that he would grieve
 To see the helpless delicate thing receive
 His guardianship through certain dark defiles.
 Had he not teeth to rend, and hunger too?
 But still he spared her. Once: 'Have you no fear?'
 He said: 'twas dusk; she in his grasp; none near.
 She laughed: 'No, surely; am I not with you?'
 And uttering that soft starry 'you,' she leaned
 Her gentle body near him, looking up;
 And from her eyes, as from a poison-cup,
 He drank until the flittering eyelids screened.
 Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam
 Of heaven's circle-glory! Here thy shape
 To squeeze like an intoxicating grape--
 I might, and yet thou goest safe, supreme.

In Stanza IX the objective narration is again resumed, but the point of view again abruptly shifts to interior monologue in line 13. From that line onward through Stanzas X-XLV inclusive, the point of view is first person, present tense narration, interspersed by interior monologue, a few snatches of dialogue, and some first person, past tense narration in the form of flashbacks.

In IX, the husband, in between his moments of compassion, feels the "wild beast" in him raging so fiercely that he fears at times to see his wife trust herself alone with him. As line 5 would indicate, the "wild beast" within him might take the form either of anger or passion, and yet he restrains both. She, of course, still treats him "as something that is tame" (cf., V), and once, walking alone at dusk within his protective grasp, simply laughs at his fears, apparently slipping, for the moment, into an affectionate echo of their old relationship together as she leans near him, looking up. The force of her sexual appeal that Meredith intends to convey in these lines may be pointed up if we compare the phrase "until the fluttering eyelids screened" with a later comment in XXXVI that "Madam's faulty feature is a glazed/ And inaccessible eye, that has soft fires,/ Wide gates, at love-time, only." As suggested in the commentary on Stanza V, it is a part of the wife's unconscious hypocrisy that she is unaware of her sexual power and careless of her sexual appeal.

As before, the irradiating power of her gaze is as a poison to the husband, and, as Friedman notes, his ambivalence toward her reaches a shrill peak: "Devilish malignant witch! and oh, young beam/ Of heaven's circle-glory!" The "young beam/ Of heaven's circle-glory" image, Friedman identifies with the rising sun, quoting as substantiation "the young sun drinks the star dew up," from Song (p. 57); and "unimagined speed and splendour in the circle of upper air!/ Glory grander than the armed host upon earth singing victory," from Phaëthôn (p. 314)—where the speeding vehicle is understood to be the sun.⁶²

⁶²"The Fire of Renewal," pp. 343-344.

Although Friedman quotes only the one line from Song here, I believe that the entire first two stanzas of that poem form an interesting parallel to the Modern Love imagery:

The Flower unfolds its dawning cup,
And the young sun drinks the star-dews up,
At eve it droops with the bliss of day,
And dreams in the midnight far away.

So am I in thy sole, sweet glance
Pressed with a weight of utterance;
Lovingly all my leaves unfold,
And gleam to the beams of thirsty gold.

(p. 57)

As is frequently the case with Modern Love stanzas, Meredith seems in Stanza IX to have taken a number of related images from one of his early sentimental poems and reworked them into an ironic commentary on such sentimentality, the irradiating "sole, sweet glance" and the 'starriness' of the early poem still retaining their power here, but the "dawning cup" of that early poem having now become a "poison-cup," from which the husband--like the 'thirsty sun' of the early poem--[drinks] until the flittering eyelids [screen]" (the man-woman roles represented by the images shift back and forth somewhat confusedly between the two poems, but the shift does not alter the sense of the images nor the irony of the comparison).

In addition to the above observations, for general conceptual purposes the "young beam/ Of heaven's circle-glory" (or sun) image may also serve simply as a variation on the idealized star image, already evoked in the present stanza by the phrase "that soft starry 'you'" in line 9.

As indicated in the last lines of the stanza, the husband, caught in the throes of his ambivalence, would like to sink into pure sensuality--

"Here thy shape/ To squeeze like an intoxicating grape--/ I might"⁶³--and yet, protected by the veneer of civilization under which they live, and by his own better instincts, she goes "safe, supreme."

X

But where began the change; and what's my crime?
The wretch condemned, who has not been arraigned,
Chafes at his sentence. Shall I, unsustained,
Drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time?
I must have slept, since now I wake. Prepare,
You lovers, to know Love a thing of moods:
Not, like hard life, of laws. In Love's deep woods,
I dreamt of loyal life!--the offense is there!
Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.--
My crime is, that the puppet of a dream,
I plotted to be worthy of the world.
Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

Again, as in Stanza VIII, the husband raises the question of the cause of the division between them, but this time his mood is significantly different. Whereas in VIII he was able to suspend judgment and go beyond the demands of his own ego and thus share her suffering along with his own, in X his mood is querulous and self-justifying. Though he ostensibly accuses himself--"But where began the change; and what's my crime?"--such a petulant self-examination obviously has as its goal the fixing of blame elsewhere. His mood of self-pity is clearly evident in the posturing and morbid image of himself as a condemned wretch, chafing at his sentence, and dragging the dead body of Love "thro' all time"--an image which also indicates the sentimentalist's inability to make productive use of Time.

⁶³Cf., "'Twould calm me could I clasp/ Shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine!" (Stanza XXXII).

By way of further contrast, whereas in VIII the language that the husband used tended to dignify their love, despite the fact of its loss ("The God once filled them with his mellow breath;/ And they were music till he flung them down"), the language which he now uses tends to devalue love: "Prepare,/ You lovers, to know love a thing of moods:/ Not, like hard life, of laws."

As is so frequently the case in his cynical outbursts, what the husband here speaks is a half-truth. Despite the elements of real value which existed in their past relationship, sentimental Love is "a thing of moods," a dream state from which one may be abruptly jarred: "I must have slept, since now I wake." "In Love's deep woods," the husband had "dreamt of loyal Life," and in this lies his "offense." To better understand the nature of this "offense," it will help us to look at a later Meredith poem, In the Woods, which echoes in its title and even more in its tenth line, "I am in deep woods," the phrase just quoted from Modern Love. As Friedman notes ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 345), a long passage from In the Woods seems to be a direct reflection of the situation in Modern Love:

I know that since the hour of birth,
 Rooted in earth,
 I have looked above,
 In joy and in grief,
 With eyes of belief,
 For love.
 A mother trains us so.
 But the love I saw was a fitful thing;
 I looked on the sun
 That clouds or is blinding aglow:
And the love around had more of wing
Than substance, and of spirit none.

Then looked I on the green earth we are rooted in,
 Whereof we grow,
 And nothing of love it said,

But gave me warnings of sin,
And lessons of patience let fall,
 And told how pain was bred,
And wherefore I was weak,
And of good and evil at strife,
And the struggle upward of all,
 And my choice of the glory of life:
 Was love farther to seek?
 (p. 344)

Friedman, as indicated in the introduction to this chapter (see pp. 43-44), identifies the sun image as "a vehicle of excessive idealism" ("The Jangled Harp," p. 16) and, in alternate phrasing, as a symbol for the "selfish, pestilential quality . . . of over-idealized love" ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 344). In a narrower application, it may also serve as a symbol of male sexual egoism (see Stanza XXVIII for an example of this usage, and "The Jangled Harp," p. 16, for Friedman's discussion of it).⁶⁴

Thus, the meaning of lines 9 and 10 of Stanza X would seem to be that Love's woods become jealous and pestilential when the lover over-idealizes himself ("the sun far brighter there did beam") and expects as well to be exempt from the struggles and uncertainties of earth. The husband's crime is that, "the puppet of [his sentimental] dream," he "plotted to be worthy of the world," while demanding absolute loyalty from his wife, rather than dealing, through patience and through knowledge of his own weakness, with the "good and evil at strife" which is necessarily attendant on all human endeavor. The phrase "plotted to be worthy

⁶⁴As Friedman points out, the use of the sun image in a pejorative sense is atypical of traditional poetic usage, but he cites as additional clues to Meredith's intention passages from the Ode to the Comic Spirit, where Egoism is imaged as "our slavish self's infernal sun" (p. 396), and from The Empty Purse, where a demagogue is to his followers "the sun of their system a father of flies" (p. 447). Besides these evidences of Friedman's, I would quote one other very explicit usage from Meredith's novel The Adventures of Harry Richmond, 2 vols. (New York, 1910), II, 184: "The central I resembled the sun of this universe, with the difference that it shrieked for nourishment instead of dispensing it."

of the world" may be taken two ways, not necessarily mutually exclusive: (1) as indicating the husband's worldly or career ambitions (his neglect of his wife for his work may have been a cause of her seeking affection elsewhere), and/or (2) as indicating his effort to share in the wider moral evolution of the world ("the struggle upward of all," as stated in In the Woods). The significant point in either case is that after half-recognizing his own sentimentality, he all too quickly shifts the focus to his wife's sentimentality--and thus clouds his own recognition:

Oh, had I with my darling helped to mince
The facts of life, you still had seen me go
With hindward feather and with forward toe,
Her much-adored delightful Fairy Prince!

The "hindward feather" and "forward toe" image does suggest the feathered cap and pointed slipper of a "delightful Fairy Prince," but it also suggests (with probably unconscious irony on the husband's part though not perhaps on the poet's part) a prancing rooster--another of Meredith's symbols of male sexual Egoism.⁶⁵ Despite his disillusionment with the ideal of sentimental Love, the husband is still far from free of his Egoism--as the tone of the whole stanza makes apparent.

XI

Out in the yellow meadows, where the bee
Hums by us with the honey of the Spring,
And showers of sweet notes from the larks on wing
Are dropping like a noon-dew, wander we.
Or is it now? or was it then? for now,

⁶⁵The rooster (or cock) is of course the traditional herald of the sun, and Meredith sometimes uses the cock and sun images in conjunction as symbols of male sexual Egoism, as for example in The Comic Spirit:

Let the cock crow and ruddy morn
His handmaiden appear! Youth claims his hour.
The generously ludicrous
Espouses it.

As then, the larks from running rings pour showers:
 The golden foot of May is on the flowers,
 And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.
 What's this, when Nature swears there is no change
 To challenge eyesight? Now, as then, the grace
 Of heaven seems holding earth in its embrace.
 Nor eyes, nor heart, has she to feel it strange?
 Look, woman, in the West. There wilt thou see
 An amber cradle near the sun's decline:
 Within it, featured even in death divine,
 Is lying a dead infant, slain by thee.

Walking in the yellow meadows, amid the beauty of the springtime,
 the husband feels, momentarily, as though they were in the past again and
 as though his wife's love were still his:

Or is it now? or was it then? for now,
 As then, the larks from running rings pour showers:
 The golden foot of May is on the flowers,
 And friendly shadows dance upon her brow.

Nature, indeed, has not changed—"Now, as then, the grace/ Of heaven seems
 holding earth in its embrace"—only they have changed, as he realizes.
 His wife, however, seems oblivious to the incongruity. And in a bitter
 interior monologue, he commands her to look to the West, where, in "an
 amber cradle near the sun's decline:/ . . . featured even in death divine,
 Is lying a dead infant," which he accuses her of slaying. The conceit,
 here, is of the amber clouds, which reflect the rays of the setting sun,
 forming a cradle in which is swaddled the new, or rising sun. As Friedman
 points out:

The imagery of sunset and sunrise is a central rebirth archetype,
 which Meredith utilizes here in a startling manner: the divine
 death should normally be reserved for the hero-god-king to symbolize
 the renewal of life on earth in the spring, yet in May when the
 hero-god-king is to be reborn, we find, instead, a dead infant.⁶⁶

⁶⁶"The Fire of Renewal," p. 149.

What the husband specifically blames the wife for is the slaying of their Love (murder-knife-wound-blood motif), and hence for the destruction of his hope for the future, but what is really at fault here is his sentimental conception of love. What he demands of Love is that it obliterate the fact of death (cf. XXX)--that it be like the sun that is "blinding aglow," as we saw in the passage from In the Woods quoted in the discussion of the previous stanza; but true love, as we also saw in that discussion, is to be found in "good and evil at strife," and such love comprehends the fact of death rather than obliterating it. As Meredith writes in the Hymn to Colour, one of the most beautiful expressions of his mature philosophy:

Love took my hand when hidden stood the sun
 To fling his robe on shoulder-heights of snow.
 Then said: There lie they, Life and Death in one.
 Whichever is, the other is: but know,
 It is thy craving self that thou dost see,
 Not in them seeing me.
 (p. 362)

Because the husband is here unable to look steadily at the death aspect of the sunset symbol, he is also unable to see "the dawn glow through," as the mature Meredith is able to see when he looks on Death in the final stanza of the Hymn to Colour (p. 364).

XII

Not solely that the Future she destroys,
 And the fair life which in the distance lies
 For all men, beckoning out from dim rich skies:
 Not that the passing hour's supporting joys
 Have lost the keen-edged flavour, which begat
 Distinction in old times, and still should breed
 Sweet Memory, and Hope,--earth's modest seed,
 And heaven's high-prompting: not that the world is flat
 Since that soft-luring creature I embraced
 Among the children of Illusion went:
 Methinks with all this loss I were content,

If the mad Past, on which my foot is based,
 Were firm, or might be blotted: but the whole
 Of life is mixed: the mocking Past will stay:
 And if I drink oblivion of a day,
 So shorten I the stature of my soul.

Not only does he blame her for destroying the "Future," but he also blames her for taking the "flavour" from the present and, later in the stanza, for making a mockery of the past. In IV he had complained that "all other joys of life . . . had suffered shipwreck" with his love, and now again he bemoans that

the passing hour's supporting joys
 Have lost the keen-edged flavour, which begat
 Distinction in old times, and still should breed
 Sweet Memory and Hope,--earth's modest seed,
And heaven's high-prompting.

As in XI, what the husband here specifically accuses the wife of destroying is the basis for his idealism, but again the real fault lies in his Egoism, his demand for a personal exemption from pain and death. In his later poetry, Meredith does certainly affirm his belief in the "Future," in the "fair life which in the distance lies," and he does conceive of the joys of the present as earth's seeds to create Hope for the future, but one must accept earth's other aspect of pain and individual death as well. Thus as he writes in the Thrush in February:

I keep the youth of souls who pitch
 Their joy in this old heart of things:

Who feel the Coming young as aye,
 Thrice hopeful on the ground we plough;
Alive for life, awake to die;
 One voice to cheer the seedling Now.

Full lasting is the song, though he,
The singer, passes: lasting too,
For souls not lent in usury,
The rapture of the forward view.

(p. 328)

For the husband, such a "rapture of the forward view" now seems impossible and the present seems "flat" and void of "seed" because his over-idealized conception of his wife has proved an "Illusion." Worse still, he feels that he can no longer trust his "Past" joy with her, which now seems merely a mockery of the present and of uncertain value in itself. The stanza does not end, however, in total cynicism. Although he here despairs that "the whole/ Of life is mixed," this in itself is a kind of negatively expressed intuition of the double aspect of nature, and he still retains, for the moment at least, some grim belief in the cumulative value of experience: he is as yet unwilling to "drink oblivion of a day," and thus "shorten the stature" of his soul.

XIII

'I play for Seasons; not Eternities!'
 Says Nature, laughing on her way. 'So must
 All those whose stake is nothing more than dust!'
 And lo, she wins, and of her harmonies
 She is full sure! Upon her dying rose
 She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,
 Scarce any retrospection in her eye;
 For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
 Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag--there, an urn.
 Pledged she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!
 This lesson of our only visible friend
 Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?
 Yes! yes!--but, oh, our human rose is fair
 Surpassingly! Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
 When the renewed for ever of a kiss
 Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!

Stanza XIII continues the Time theme of the two previous stanzas, but the husband now states his despair in more intellectually cynical (or partly cynical because ambiguous) terms. Although many of the sentiments (and the images used to express them) are very close to expressions in Meredith's mature nature philosophy, the net implication of the stanza is,

as Friedman notes, "a curious inversion"⁶⁷ of the mature philosophy. "Nature," according to the husband, plays "for Seasons; not Eternities!" and so also must man, whose "stake" in this game is no more than the "dust" he is made of. Nature, as the husband continues, "wins" the game,

and of her harmonies
 She is full sure! Upon her dying rose
 She drops a look of fondness, and goes by,
 Scarce any retrospection in her eye;
 For she the laws of growth most deeply knows,
 Whose hands bear, here, a seed-bag--there, an urn.
 Pledged she herself to aught, 'twould mark her end!
 This lesson of our only visible friend
 Can we not teach our foolish hearts to learn?

As I have suggested, this is ambiguous language, but the net implication--i.e., that Nature plays only for Seasons--is a cynical falsification of Meredith's mature position, for according to that position, Nature, in her final purposes, does play for Eternities, and man may spiritually share in that larger promise.

Thus, in the Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn (written at approximately the same time as Modern Love), Nature is again described as "our only visible friend," but there her laughter (cf., line 2 of this stanza) is definitely identified as hopeful:

Hark to her laughter! who laughs like this,
 Can she be dead, or rooted in pain?
 She has been slain by the narrow brain,
 But for us who love her she lives again.
 (p. 175)

And later in the same poem, with more echoes of the Modern Love stanza, Meredith asks of Nature,

⁶⁷"The Fire of Renewal," p. 347.

Mock me not with thy harmonies!
Teach me to blot regrets,
 Great Mother! me inspire
 With faith that forward sets

 Death shall I shrink from, loving thee?
Into the breast that gives the rose,
 Shall I with shuddering fall?
 (p. 176)

And still again in the same poem, echoing the life-death motif of the seed-bag and the urn (line 9):

She knows not loss:
 She feels but her need,
Who the winged seed
With the leaf doth toss.

 Behold, in yon stripped Autumn, shivering grey,
 Earth knows no desolation.
She smells regeneration
In the moist breath of decay.
 (p. 177)

What this indicates is that the husband, working from within the confines of "the narrow brain" (see p. 175, Ode to the Spirit of Earth in Autumn--quoted above)--i.e., from within the limitations of his own Egoism, is unable to read "this lesson" of Nature aright (or even to express it adequately): he is unable to accept (and see hope in) Nature's double aspect of life and death. Instead he wishes to cling to his sentimental conception of Love, which (as indicated in XXX) blots out the fact of death entirely; he is unwilling to

Lose calmly Love's great bliss,
 When the renewed for ever of a kiss
Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!

In a related cluster of images in XXIX, a kiss is described as a "wave/
 Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea."⁶⁸ What the husband cries out

⁶⁸The sentimental image of "the renewed for ever of a kiss" also echoes two lines from a very early poem "Angelic Love" (where very

so desperately to cling to, then, is an over-idealism or sentimentalism, which ironically is based on sensualism (realistically imaged by kisses and hair in XIII and figuratively imaged in other parts of the poem by ocean-wave imagery), and which has in fact already suffered shipwreck (IV), thus leading to his present cynicism: sentimentalism, sensualism, and cynicism all being typical reversals of one another in the total imbalance which is Egoism (cf., p. 40).

With these related ocean-wave and shipwreck motifs in mind, we may see, perhaps, Meredith's most telling commentary on the attitudes expressed in this stanza in the following passage from the Hymn to Colour:

They do not look through love to look on thee,
 Grave heavenliness! nor know they joy of sight,
 Who deem the wave of rapt desire must be
 Its wrecking and last issue of delight.
Dead seasons quicken in one petal-spot
Of colour unforget.
 (p. 364)

XIV

What soul would bargain for a cure that brings
 Contempt the nobler agony to kill?
 Rather let me bear on the bitter ill,
 And strike this rusty bosom with new stings!
 It seems there is another veering fit,
 Since on a gold-haired lady's eyeballs pure
 I looked with little prospect of a cure,
 The while her mouth's red bow loosed shafts of wit.
 Just heaven! can it be true that jealousy
 Has decked the woman thus? and does her head
 Swim somewhat for possessions forfeited?
 Madam, you teach me many things that be.
 I open an old book, and there I find
 That 'Women still may love whom they deceive.'
 Such love I prize not, madam: by your leave,
 The game you play at is not to my mind.

sensual and very idealistic images are naively mixed throughout):

The undying bliss
 Of its most fleeting kiss.
 (p. 17)

In this state of partial disillusionment where he is wavering between his intellectual cynicism and sexual frustration on the one hand and his pained idealism and the memory of actual value in his past relationship on the other hand, the husband begins to toy with the idea of a flirtation of his own as a solace for his present suffering. The object of his tentative attraction is a lady friend, golden-haired and witty, who will indeed serve as a "distraction" in later stanzas of the poem (Stanzas XXVII ff). For the present, however, he rejects such a "cure," which would bring "contempt the nobler agony to kill." The "nobler agony" is of course the profound sense of spiritual and emotional loss which he feels, and to accept a merely physical (and intellectual) flirtation as sufficient solace for such a loss would be to deny any real value in the thing lost; it would be an action in contempt of the ideal of love, and it would bring self-contempt in its train, in that it would be an admission of sensualism. Rather than give way to sensualism and to complete cynicism at this point, he prefers to "bear on the bitter ill" and strike his bosom with "new stings"—a reiteration of the serpent-venom-poison motif which indicates that his underlying conception of his wife as the enslaver-betrayer has not changed and that he still clings fondly to his self-righteous conception of himself as the wronged husband.

His present momentary attraction to the lady does not pass, however, before arousing suspicion on the part of his wife, who here experiences the kind of "veering fit" which he himself will experience in Stanzas XL-XLI. "Can it be true," he asks himself in the present stanza, that jealousy has made her "head/ Swim somewhat for possessions forfeited," and answers his own question with an aphorism ostensibly found in an old book, to the effect that "'Women still may love whom they deceive.'" Such

love he scornfully rejects and refuses to play with her (though again only for the time being) the "game" of sentiment.

What we have in Stanza XIV is, then, a curious mixture of restraint and further degeneration of feeling. Though he does resist the kind of direct sensual temptation that would bring in its wake immediate self-contempt, he nonetheless slips further into a kind of worldly cynicism which is itself contemptible: "Madam, you teach me many things that be." Though he scornfully rejects the wife's "veering fit" and childish attempt to involve him in a "game" of sentiment, his own tone takes on a new note of flippancy, and his attitude reflects a new sexual arrogance which is itself based on the very new-found-attractiveness (to his wife as well as to the golden-haired lady) which he ostensibly despises.

The golden-haired lady here introduced is referred to throughout the rest of the poem as "My Lady" in distinction from "Madam," his wife.

XV

I think she sleeps: it must be sleep, when low
Hangs that abandoned arm toward the floor;
The face turned with it. Now make fast the door.
Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe.
The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love
Frights not our modern dames:--well if he did!
Now will I pour new light upon that lid,
Full-sloping like the breasts beneath. 'Sweet dove,
Your sleep is pure. Nay, pardon: I disturb.
I do not? good!' Her waking infant-stare
Grows woman to the burden my hands bear:
Her own handwriting to me when no curb
Was left on Passion's tongue. She trembles through;
A woman's tremble--the whole instrument:--
I show another letter lately sent.
The words are very like: the name is new.

It is perhaps significant that the husband's first act of intentional cruelty comes after the wife's "veering fit," which gives the husband a new sense of advantage in their conflict at the same time that it generally coarsens and lowers the tone of their relationship.

In a scene which consciously reminds him of the famous "Put out the light" scene in Othello, he enters his wife's room bearing a candle, makes "fast the door," and then stands over her sleeping form as Othello had stood over the sleeping form of Desdemona. Unfortunately, as he ironically comments to himself, "the Poet's black stage-lion" frights not the modern wife. Modern social and moral values no longer condone the kind of swift recourse to violence with which Othello attempted to settle his domestic affairs, nor indeed does the modern psychological temperament allow the kind of sublimation of anger and frustration into channels of righteous wrath and sorrow which Othello felt, at least in part, as he meted out his "justice." Thus Shakespeare's scene of high tragedy and pathos is here reduced to a kind of cheap melodrama played out by a modern husband fully and sardonically aware of the contrast which his actions present.

Standing over his wife's sleeping form, he moves the candle closer, pouring "new light upon that lid [the coverlet],/ Full-sloping like the breasts beneath." (The phrase "pour new light upon that lid" has, I think, a second level of meaning as well, that of throwing the harsh glare of discovery on her sleeping eyelid.) Though he protests any wish to disturb her, his obvious intent has been to awaken her. When she does respond, her innocent waking stare grows subtle and secretive as she realizes what he holds in his hand, an old love-letter from her to him when "no curb/ Was left on Passion's tongue." Acutely aware of her painful agitation as she "trembles through" like a tautly-stringed instrument, he applies a final twist to the knife, another letter, recently sent to the other man, and bearing much the same import as her old letter to him.

The confrontation is apparently not intended to prove anything-- certainly he has known of her feeling toward the other man for some time and the incident marks no apparent change in the present relationship of the husband and wife. In any event, whatever the motivation, the incident has an air of gratuitous and morbid cruelty about it which makes the stanza, as M. Sturge Henderson has noted, "one of the most unpleasant in the series."⁶⁹

XVI

In our old shipwrecked days there was an hour,
 When in the firelight steadily aglow,
 Joined slackly, we beheld the red chasm grow
 Among the clicking coals. Our library-bower
 That eve was left to us: and hushed we sat
 As lovers to whom Time is whispering.
 From sudden-opened doors we heard them sing:
 The nodding elders mixed good wine with chat.
 Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
 With us, and of it was our talk. 'Ah, yes!
 Love dies!' I said: I never thought it less.
 She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.
 Then when the fire domed blackening, I found
 Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
 Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:--
 Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

Stanza XVI, which utilizes a first person, past tense narration or flashback technique, is, like Stanza VIII, one of the few stanzas in the poem which evoke with great intensity what had been of beauty and value in the love relationship whose disintegration the poem records.

Despite the progressive degeneration of his feelings, there are still times when the husband remembers with poignant clarity their former hours of happiness together. In one such hour, before their marriage had suffered shipwreck, they had sat together in the steady glow of the

⁶⁹George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer, p. 67.

firelight, delightfully conscious of their lovers' isolation from the mundane world of normal social intercourse, and not uncomfortably awed by the mysterious voice of Time. The sound of convivial after-dinner chat among the drowsy "elders," which had come to them through "sudden-opened doors," had served but to enhance their happiness, for they knew that "Life's greatest treasure" lay with them.

Their talk was of that treasure, of love, and the husband, in a passing fancy, had said sententiously, "Ah, yes! Love dies," not in the least believing it himself at the time. She had yearned to him to "unsay" his sentence, but the awful thing was said, and when the "fire domed blackening," in silent punctuation of that pronouncement, he had tasted the salt tears on her cheek, and had heard her high-pitched sobs as she leaned against him. Now, amid the wreckage of their love, he is "haunted by that taste! that sound!"

Although the above relatively brief sketch may cover well enough the primary narrative meaning of Stanza XVI, it does not, as it seems to me, account for the richness of emotional and sensory suggestion in the stanza. I have previously spoken of the peculiar but effective use which Meredith makes of words of multiple meaning (usually of multiple denotation) from time to time throughout Modern Love (In II, I noted especially the multiple uses of "humour" and "ape"; and other interesting examples will be considered in Stanzas XXI, XXII, and XXXVII).

In the case of Stanza XVI, although only the word "elders" provides a clear-cut example of the use of a word of multiple denotation, a number of other words and phrases, either on a literal or on a metaphorical level, are capable of alternate connotations and associations--with several of

such alternate associations adhering to one another to form what amounts to a kind of subliminal second setting for the stanza.

Thus, the phrase "In our old shipwrecked days" in line 1 must, in the realistic context of the poem, mean "In the days before our marriage suffered shipwreck," but its syntax and its immediate associations also set up reverberations of the more romantic picture of days spent alone together on a deserted island. Without definitely clarifying such an outdoors picture, the images of the fire in lines 2, 3, and 4 continue the reverberations. The first half of the "library-bower" image in line 4 then definitely establishes the actual setting of the stanza, but the last half of the combination adds further detail to the idyllic background picture. And next, in the image of Time whispering, in line 6, the sensory suggestions, at least, seem to be of the wind whispering, or of the ocean, or of some elemental force whispering. The convivial after-dinner scene in lines 7 and 8 then further establishes the realistic setting--as well as providing a fine contrast to the silent young lovers; but in the alternate denotation of "nodding elders," we have again something of the effect of wind in the trees. It is perhaps only an intellectual turn of mind rather than a sensory impression that would connect the word "treasure" in the next line with the shipwreck image back in line 1, and I would not insist on the effectiveness of the combination; but I do not think it is too much to say that the phrase "the fire domed blackening" in line 13 has some sensory connotation that the sky domed blackening, and thus keeps alive the outdoors feeling of the stanza. Finally, in perhaps a very subliminal way, I think we may connect the phrase "Her cheek was salt against my kiss" in line 14 with some lingering mist of ocean spray--since the connotation here is again sensory and not intellectual.

In justifying this analysis of the stanza I do not think that the individual reader need be consciously aware of each of these romantic implications, and I do not think that the implications need ever combine into a clarified picture that would replace the realistic setting--if they did I think that they would weaken the effect of the stanza--but I do think it is only some such "subliminal" combination of secondary implications as this that can explain the almost magical feeling that the stanza evokes even on a first sensitive reading.

XVII

At dinner, she is hostess, I am host.
 Went the feast ever cheerfuller? She keeps
 The Topic over intellectual deeps
 In buoyancy afloat. They see no ghost.
 With sparkling surface-eyes we ply the ball:
 It is in truth a most contagious game:
 HIDING THE SKELETON, shall be its name.
 Such play as this the devils might appal!
 But here's the greater wonder; in that we,
 Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,
 Each other, like true hypocrites, admire;
 Warm-lighted looks, Love's ephemerioe [sic],
 Shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine.
 We waken envy of our happy lot.
 Fast, sweet, and golden, shows the marriage-knot.
 Dear guests, you now have seen Love's corpse-light shine.

If little of their past happiness remains, the convivial social life at least goes on. Forced to keep up a brave front before the world, both husband and wife, while entertaining guests at dinner, are animated and witty, the wife, like a skilled hostess, keeping the topic of conversation (which might otherwise bog down in dull intellectual debate among the men) buoyantly afloat, and the husband zestfully joining in the game of hiding the true state of their marriage. The obvious need to keep up social appearances does not, however, fully explain the complex psychological state reflected in this stanza. As indicated in previous quotations from

Friedman, the game motif, here and elsewhere in the poem "functions as a vehicle of their nervous frustration seeking an outlet. Since the sentimentalist cannot incorporate the fact of change into his scheme of values, his behavior resolves ultimately into a kind of manic-depressive shift: sometimes he is sunk under an oppressive cloud, sometimes he is gay and superficial—all in an effort to ignore or gloss over [for himself as well as for others] the reality of the situation."⁷⁰

In the present stanza, the couple are, of course, successful in glossing over the reality of the situation for the dinner-guests, who "see no ghost" behind the "sparkling surface-eyes," but they are also successful, fitfully, in glossing over the reality for themselves. The "acting," in fact, goes beyond bright and witty conversation: "But here's the greater wonder; in that we/ Enamoured of an acting nought can tire,/ Each other like true hypocrites, admire." The "warm-lighted looks," which "shoot gaily o'er the dishes and the wine," are not false—they are the true "ephemerioe" [sic] of love, the short-lived impulses of sexual attraction, only the situation that called them forth is false. In their "game" of sentiment, begun as a social pretense, the husband and wife have actually become sexually stimulated by one another, and their "game" thus ends as a false cloak for their sensualism. It is "such play as this" that might 'appal the devils' (line 8). What we have, in fact, in this stanza, is a brief hint of what the husband means in Stanza XXXVIII when he speaks of "that hideous human game [which 'shames the devils']:--/ Imagination urging appetite!" That the husband is here aware of the grim irony of the social pretense—"Dear guests, you now have seen Love's

⁷⁰"The Jangled Harp," p. 15.

corpse-light shine"--does not mean, of course, that he is secure from the perils of that game. That he is here, indeed, at least partially aware of the personal degradation involved in such a game--a game that he had scornfully rejected in Stanza XIV--can only add to his spiritual torment.

Line 16. corpse-light. A luminous appearance resembling the flame of a candle, sometimes seen in graveyards and damp places; it is thought to portend death.

XVIII

Here Jack and Tom are paired with Moll and Meg.
 Curved open to the river-reach is seen
 A country merry-making on the green.
 Fair space for signal shakings of the leg.
 That little screwy fiddler from his booth,
 Whence flows one nut-brown stream, commands the joints
 Of all who caper here at various points.
 I have known rustic revels in my youth:
 The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease.
 An early goddess was a country lass:
 A charmed Amphion-oak she tripped the grass.
 What life was that I lived? The life of these?
 Heaven keep them happy! Nature they seem near.
 They must, I think, be wiser than I am;
 They have the secret of the bull and lamb.
 'Tis true that when we trace its source, 'tis beer.

In pointed contrast to the sophisticated dining-room milieu of the preceding stanza, Stanza XVIII finds the husband looking on at a country festival on the village green. Watching the country people dance, "Hodge with Audrey," as G. M. Trevelyan puts it,⁷¹ he recalls the "rustic revels" of his own youth—"The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease." The May-fly image is highly significant here, for if we note that May-fly is the common term for the "ephemerioe" [sic] (the delicate and short-lived insect alluded to in the previous stanza), the contrast between the simple happiness of his early revels and his present refined misery becomes even

⁷¹Poetry and Philosophy, p. 26.

more apparent. In his early unsophisticated days he had suffered from no demoralizing split between the ephemeral impulses of sexual attraction and the demands of a moral justification for love.

The country dancers, as it seems to the husband, also suffer from no demoralizing split between instinct and intelligence. "They must," he thinks, "be wiser" than he is, since they are able to enjoy sensual pleasures without self-consciousness and therefore without the need falsely to idealize or otherwise justify their passion. Upon reflection, however, he wryly--and cynically--concludes that "beer," not wisdom, is what releases them to "the secret of the bull and lamb."

It should be understood here that what is at issue in this and in surrounding stanzas is not simply a conflict between the demands of uninhibited sensualism and the demands of a romantic or sentimental over-idealization of love, though certainly that is part of the conflict. What is also at issue is the conflict between all of the forces of imbalance--which include sensualism, cynicism, and sentimentalism--and the forces of balance, the forces of true moral responsibility for sexual actions.

To a degree the youth, dancing with his rustic sweetheart, had been legitimately exempt from that conflict in that his instinct, his intelligence, and his heart all seemed to tell him that his attraction was wholesome and proper and in that his sexual conduct in itself had probably not as yet reached a point where it might have lasting consequences for good or evil. In so far as the country dancers described in the present stanza are themselves made up of such youthful couples, the similarity of their merriment to the innocent gamboling of animals is probably also a more or less just prerogative of their youthful situation, but for the older members of the community (or, to put the matter another way, for those

involved in more advanced sexual situations) there is really no legitimate "secret of the bull and lamb." The distinctive mark of humanity is that it must come to terms with complex moral commitments non-existent in the animal world. For the husband to yearn nostalgically for the simple emotions of his youth is understandable enough, but he cannot legitimately expect to return to the uncomplicated sexual situation that permitted them.

This does not mean, of course, that a full and wholesome and "unself-conscious" joy in love must be always denied to the mature individual, but it does mean that he may not always come to such joy unaccompanied by pain, by disappointment, and by self-discipline. That the husband here wryly rejects a sensual freedom that finds its release only through drunkenness (as is doubtless the case with some of the dancers he is observing) is to his credit; that he here concludes "beer" to be the only source of unimpinged joy among the dancers (denying the possibility of a higher integration) is, as suggested above, but another mark of his growing cynicism.

Line 11. A charmed Amphion-oak. Amphion was a legendary singer of Greece, who, like Orpheus, charmed the trees into movement. The tall country lass seemed to the lad's fancy like an oak-tree moving to music. (Trevelyan's note)⁷²

XIX

No state is enviable. To the luck alone
Of some few favoured men I would put claim.
I bleed, but her who wounds I will not blame.
Have I not felt her heart as 'twere my own
Beat thro' me? could I hurt her? heaven and hell!
But I could hurt her cruelly! Can I let
My Love's old time-piece to another set,
Swear it can't stop, and must for ever swell?
Sure, that's one way Love drifts into the mart

⁷²"Notes," The Poetical Works, p. 582.

Where goat-legged buyers throng. I see not plain:--
 My meaning is, it must not be again.
 Great God! the maddest gambler throws his heart.
 If any state be enviable on earth,
 'Tis yon born idiot's, who, as days go by,
 Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,
 In a queer sort of meditative mirth.

His cynical musing continues. Not only are the village dancers not to be envied, but, except for the "luck" of some few men especially "favoured" by fate or chance, "no state is enviable." For the moment, he is willing to hold his wife blameless, at least on the conscious level, seeing both her and himself together as the hapless victims of chance, but perhaps significantly it is still she "who wounds"; and in the next two lines, it is apparent that, regardless of whether she has shared his heart and fate, he could still turn and "hurt her cruelly," such being the intensity of his own pain and such the nature of human complexity.

Again, in his disillusionment, he toys with the idea of a shift in affection to another woman (apparently still thinking of the golden-haired Lady introduced in Stanza XIV): "Can I let/ My Love's old time-piece to another set,/ Swear it can't stop, and must for ever swell?" The peculiar, and obviously somewhat mixed, metaphor in these lines apparently results from Meredith's using the "time-piece" image as a metaphor for heart, and then describing, in part, the action of the primary object (the heart's swelling) rather than the action appropriate to the metaphorical object (the time-piece, which can stop, but which can hardly swell). That heart is the primary object for the metaphor here is, I think, evidenced by a similar passage from the Ode to the Comic Spirit:

Ah, what a fruitless breeder is this heart,

 by turns a lump
 Swung on a time-piece, and by turns
 A quivering energy to jump
 For seats angelical.
 (p. 399)

What the husband is saying in the present stanza is, then, that if he could set his "Love's old time-piece" to another woman, if he could transfer his heart's affection from his wife to the blonde Lady, could he then "swear" that his affection would flourish there, and "never stop." And even if he should chance that, would Love, under such easily transferable conditions be anything more than mere sensualism? "Sure, that's one way Love drift's into the mart"--where affections are bought and sold, and where men are reduced to the status of "goat-legged" satyrs.

After almost losing track of his own argument, he can only conclude that "it must not be again," that Love itself is a mad gamble under any circumstances: "Great God! the maddest gambler [is the one who] throws his heart."⁷³ In the end--"caught between the upper and nether millstones of his ambivalence," as Friedman puts it ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 351); unable either to turn to mere sensualism or to find any hope of a return to the kind of ideal love he has lost--he can only envy the mindless stupor of the village idiot. For one who had been unwilling to "drink oblivion of a day" (Stanza XII), he has indeed reached a low ebb in his feelings.

XX

I am not one of those miserable males
Who sniff at vice, and, daring not to snap,
Do therefore hope for heaven. I take the hap
Of all my deeds. The wind that fills my sails
Propels; but I am helmsman. Am I wrecked,
I know the devil has sufficient weight
To bear: I lay it not on him, or fate.
Besides, he's damned. That man I do suspect

⁷³Cf., "The bone and marrow of study form the surest antidote to the madness of that light gambler, the heart." The Adventures of Harry Richmond, I, 323.

A coward, who would burden the poor deuce
 With what ensues from his own slipperiness.
 I have just found a wanton-scented tress
 In an old desk, dusty for lack of use.
 Of days and nights it is demonstrative,
 That, like some aged star, gleam luridly.
 If for those times I must ask charity,
 Have I not any charity to give?

The abject pessimism of Stanza XIX is not typical of the husband's nature, however, and in XX he attempts to face his problem more rationally. As Friedman notes, "he specifically renounces the self-righteousness of Egoistic Asceticism."⁷⁴ If there is no easy solution to his dilemma, he will at least recognize his sensual impulses for what they are, and will assume responsibility for his own deeds. In this, he also, of course, specifically renounces the conception of fate or "luck" which had so dominated his thought in the preceding stanza. Though powerful forces may press against him, he nevertheless affirms his power of decision: "The wind that fills my sails/ Propels; but I am helmsman." Only a coward would blame the devil or fate for what results from his own weakness.⁷⁵

His present train of thought has apparently been prompted by the finding of a lock of hair in an old desk, an obvious memento of a former love-escapade of his own. Realizing that he is as human and fallible as his wife, he asks himself whether he has not "any charity" to offer her.

⁷⁴"The Fire of Renewal," p. 352.

⁷⁵Meredith's own scorn for the conception of fate, and perhaps for the kind of Egoistic Asceticism here mentioned by Friedman, may be seen in the following lines from the Ode to the Comic Spirit:

Or see we ceremonial state,
 Robing the gilded beast, exact
 Abjection, while the crackskull name of Fate
 Is used to stamp and hallow printed fact.

(p. 396)

The star image, as discussed previously (see pp. 49 and 64-65), is one of Meredith's symbols for the romantic conception of Love, connoting both the steadfastness of the female partner and the permanence of love itself. As we have seen, the wife's star has appeared as ironically shadowed throughout the poem. But it is doubly ironic that the husband should here apply the same overcast star image ("That, like some aged star, gleam luridly") to another woman, since it indicates that he had, at least tentatively, woven the same kind of romantic conception around an amour which must have been rather trivial at best, and certainly fleeting.

A somewhat similar irony may also be seen in the use of the hair image in this stanza. In XIII, "the renewed for ever of a kiss" whirled life "within the shower of loosened hair." Here, all that is left of the for ever of romantic love is "a wanton-scented tress" found "in an old desk, dusty for lack of use."

XXI

We three are on the cedar-shadowed lawn;
 My friend being third. He who at love once laughed
 Is in the weak rib by a fatal shaft
 Struck through, and tells his passions' bashful dawn
 And radiant culmination, glorious crown,
 When 'this' she said: went 'thus': most wondrous she.
 Our eyes grow white, encountering: that we are three,
 Forgetful; then together we look down.
 But he demands our blessing; is convinced
 That words of wedded lovers must bring good.
 We question; if we dare! or if we should!
 And pat him, with light laugh. We have not winced.
 Next, she has fallen. Fainting points the sign
 To happy things in wedlock. When she wakes,
 She looks the star that thro' the cedar shakes:
 Her lost moist hand clings mortally to mine.

Again, they are forced to keep up a brave front before the world. Standing on the "cedar-shadowed lawn," probably in the late twilight, the husband and wife chat with a friend, a young man who had once scoffed at

love, but who is now "struck through" by Cupid's "fatal shaft." The young man tells his married friends not only of his new-found love, but also of his "passion's bashful dawn/ And radiant culmination, glorious crown,/ When 'this' she said: went 'thus': most wondrous she." The enigmatic phrasing, here, I can interpret only as reflecting in an elliptical, and probably non-literal, manner the young man's hinted recital of his passion's consummation.

It is, apparently, the young man's hinted recital--innocuous enough, as it might seem to him, in the presence of intimate, married friends--which causes their shocked exchange of glances ("our eyes grow white, encountering") as they remember their own past sexual felicity and their present painful détente. So intense is their shocked exchange that for the moment they forget the friend's presence entirely, but then, remembering the social exigencies, both together "look down." The friend, unaware of the painful moment he has initiated, demands their blessing on his affair, "convinced/ That words of wedded lovers must bring good." Again they exchange glances, questioning their right to give such blessing; then, with a deprecatory "laugh," they pat him on the back. They "have not winced," but the tension proves too much for the wife, and she falls fainting to the ground--leaving the husband to wonder at the irony of the friend's probable interpretation of her fainting: "Fainting points the sign/ To happy things in wedlock." When she wakes, the wife looks as tremulous as the star seen through the waving cedar branch--a repetition of the overcast star motif--and her hand clings, with poignant desperation, to her husband's hand.

In lines 15 and 16, Meredith again makes highly effective use of the multiple meanings of words and phrases. Thus, looks the star has connotations both of looking at the star and looking like the star. Much more subtle and significant, however, are the multiple impressions created by the last line--Her lost moist hand clings mortally to mine. Here, on the one level, the hand that he had previously lost now clings mortally (i.e., mutably) to his; and, on the other level, her lost [,] moist hand (i.e., her morally guilty hand) now clings mortally (i.e., with human frailty) to his.⁷⁶ In addition to these meanings, there is also, of course, in this line a foreshadowing of the wife's actual death and the husband's loss, which will occur in the concluding stanzas of the poem.

Line 3. the weak rib. Adam's rib.

Lines 5 and 6. his passion's bashful dawn/ And radiant culmination, glorious crown. "Dawn," "radiant," and "glorious crown" again echo the sun imagery of over-idealized love.

XXII

What may the woman labour to confess?
There is about her mouth a nervous twitch.
'Tis something to be told, or hidden:--which?
I get a glimpse of hell in this mild guess.
She has desires of touch, as if to feel
That all the household things are things she knew.
She stops before the glass. What sight in view?
A face that seems the latest to reveal!
For she turns from it hastily, and tossed
Irresolute steals shadow-like to where
I stand; and wavering pale before me there,
Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost.
She will not speak. I will not ask. We are
League-sundered by the silent gulf between.
You burly lovers on the village green,
Yours is a lower, and a happier star!

⁷⁶In calling attention to this impression of the wife's frailty, I do not mean to imply that this line may be taken as evidence in any way of her actual bodily infidelity. As I have said before, I think this question is left intentionally ambiguous throughout the poem.

Following the fainting episode on the lawn, it becomes evident to the husband that the wife is hovering on the verge of some sort of confession--as indicated by her nervous features. Whether she is struggling most to speak, or most to hide her emotions, he is uncertain, but he gets a hint "in this mild guess" of how tortured she must be in her indecision.⁷⁷

She is in fact, as he further notes, suffering acutely from the loss of a sense of relationship: "She has desires of touch," as if to assure herself of the reality of her past life with him--"as if to feel/ That all the household things are things she knew." For her too, "the mad Past" will not be "firm" (cf., Stanza XII).⁷⁸ When she pauses before the mirror, she sees only evidence of her recent estrangement and perhaps the signs of fading beauty--"a face that seems the latest to reveal!" Frightened still more by what she sees, and "tossed irresolute," she steals to where the husband stands, and "shadow-like" and "wavering pale" (another repetition of the overcast star motif), she weeps silently before him there. She is now, certainly, much in need of his "charity," but she is too proud to speak, and--despite the rationale for forgiveness which he had considered in XX ("If for those times I must ask charity,/ Have I not any charity to give?")--he also is too proud to make the first move. Thus, once more, imperfect demand and pathetic dumbness mark their relationship and they are

⁷⁷Lines 3 and 4, with the "something to be . . . hidden" and the "glimpse of hell," may also suggest the husband's suspicion of the wife's infidelity, but again I believe the actual question of infidelity is left intentionally ambiguous.

⁷⁸Highly significant here is the fact that it is the husband, speaking in the present tense, and not simply an "omniscient" author, who makes this acute observation as to the wife's state of mind. It is an irony to which Modern Love does full justice that two people so sensitively attuned to one another's most subtle moods may yet find themselves hopelessly estranged--unable to consciously articulate that word which might breach the silence between them.

"league-sundered by the silent gulf between." With perhaps less cynicism now, the husband thinks again of the "lower," and "happier," fate of the "burly lovers" dancing "on the village green" (cf., XVIII).

In line 12, "Her tears fall still as oak-leaves after frost"--which contains one of the most beautiful images of the poem, Meredith again makes extremely skillful use of the multiple connotations of a single word. The key word here is still, which has connotations in the realm of time (her tears fall yet; her tears fall continuously), in the realm of sound (her tears fall silently), and in the realm of space (her tears fall motionless, as oak-leaves after frost).

It should be further noted that lines 9-14 inclusive all tend to operate on two levels, first to characterize the nervous, delicate sensitivity of the woman, and second, to create an impressionistic scene of late autumn. Thus the phrases "tossed irresolute," "shadow-like," "wavering pale," and "fall still as oak-leaves after frost" all work together to create an impression of approaching winter: a feeling of occasional gusty winds, of darkening days, and of falling temperatures--all of which contrast sharply with the balmy summer setting of the burly lovers on the village green (contrast also the "charmed Amphion-oak" which "tripped the grass" in XVIII and the motionless "oak-leaves after frost" in this stanza).

Finally, it should be noted that, in addition to contributing to the emotional impact of the present stanza, the autumn atmosphere suggested by these images is part of a very subtle progression of seasonal imagery, wherein the metaphorical seasonal images of this stanza effectively prepare us for the actual "Christmas weather," the "low starlight," and the "freezing darkness" of the following stanza.

XXIII

'Tis Christmas weather, and a country house
 Receives us: rooms are full: we can but get
 An attic-crib. Such lovers will not fret
 At that, it is half-said. The great carouse
 Knocks hard upon the midnight's hollow door,
 But when I knock at hers, I see the pit.
 Why did I come here in that dullard fit?
 I enter, and lie couched upon the floor.
 Passing, I caught the coverlet's quick beat:--
 Come, Shame, burn to my soul! and Pride, and Pain--
 Foul demons that have tortured me, enchain!
 Out in the freezing darkness the lambs bleat.
 The small bird stiffens in the low starlight.
 I know not how, but shuddering as I slept,
 I dreamed a banished angel to me crept:
 My feet were nourished on her breasts all night.

During the Christmas season, still another ironic social situation presents itself. Visiting in a country house, they are forced to share an attic bedroom--their hosts seeing no imposition in these cramped quarters for such happily-married "lovers." Down below, "the great carouse" lasts well into the midnight hours, with the wife apparently retiring somewhat before the husband. When he does ascend to their room, he abruptly realizes the painful sexual complexity of their plight. Blaming himself for his "dullard fit" that allowed such a situation to come about, he enters to "lie couched upon the floor." Passing the bed, he is made aware, by the rapidity of her pulse-beats, that she too is awake and that she too is acutely affected by their proximity. In their unnaturally renewed intimacy, he is forced to call on Shame, on Pride, and on all the memories of his recent torture, in order to keep from going to her. When he does sleep, "shuddering" in the cold--while the "small bird stiffens" and the "lambs bleat" in the "freezing darkness" outside--he dreams that she creeps to him, and that his "feet were nourished on her breasts all night." The significance of this curious feet-breasts relationship has been traced in detail by Friedman:

In Shemselnihar, an ill-mated woman yearns for the lover who has shown her what a man can mean to a woman, and her devotion is absolute: she is "the life that here fawns to give warmth to thy feet" (p. 171). In A Spanish Ballad, a similarly ill-mated woman has given herself to a similar lover:

At my breasts I cool thy footsoles;
Wine I pour, I dress thy meats;
Humbly, when my lord it pleaseth,
Lie with him on perfumed sheets.
(p. 274)

We can see, then, that in the misery of his tangled emotions the husband has an extreme wish-fulfilment fantasy: he dreams of a woman in terms of an imagery which connotes complete love and subservience, even to the point of abjectness.⁷⁹

As Friedman further suggests--though I think not very clearly here--the wife can come to him now as his "angel"--comforter only in dreams; otherwise she now appears to him as a witch-like enslaver-betrayer--this polar aspect of his conception of her being conveyed in this stanza by the infernal images of the "pit," the "foul demons," and perhaps the "midnight's hollow door"--all of which images also reflect his own projected sensualism.

The irony of the infernal images here and of the painful alienation of the husband and wife is intensified not only by the general setting of the Christmas season, the traditional season of joy and love, but also by echoes of the nativity scene itself: "Christmas weather," "rooms are full," "attic-crib," "lambs," "low starlight," "slept," "dreamed," and "angel," all suggesting the Biblical story of the birth of Christ.⁸⁰

⁷⁹"The Fire of Renewal," p. 354.

⁸⁰Elizabeth C. Wright, p. 7, calls attention to echoes of the nativity scene in this stanza, but notes few specific parallels.

XXIV

The misery is greater, as I live!
 To know her flesh so pure, so keen her sense,
 That she does penance now for no offense,
 Save against Love. The less can I forgive!
 The less can I forgive, though I adore
 That cruel lovely pallor which surrounds
 Her footsteps; and the low vibrating sounds
 That come on me, as from a magic shore.
 Low are they, but most subtle to find out
 The shrinking soul. Madam, 'tis understood
 When women play upon their womanhood,
 It means, a Season gone. And yet I doubt
 But I am duped. That nun-like look waylays
 My fancy. Oh! I do but wait a sign!
 Pluck out the eyes of pride! thy mouth to mine!
 Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!

His misery is but the more intense to know that she is now guiltless of bodily infidelity, that her sensibilities are so keen "that she does penance now for no offense,"⁸¹ except in her failure to hold firm in her love for him. This he cannot forgive, for it strikes at his ego, though at the same time he finds himself immensely attracted by the "cruel lovely pallor which surrounds/ Her footsteps" (that is, I think, by the intensity of her repression of her own impulses, giving her an aspect of cold purity, a purity which his tortured idealism demands), and by "the low vibrating sounds/ That come on [him], as from a magic shore" (that is, by the near-subliminal, but still vibrant sexual appeal that her beauty yet has for him). Low-keyed as it is, and draped in the guise of tragic purity, the sexual appeal is "most subtle to find out/ The shrinking soul."

And then, by an abrupt shift in perspective, the husband, momentarily conscious of the sexual appeal, mentally accuses the wife of intentional flirting--such calculated flirtation being to him a sign of the absence of true love: "Madam, 'tis understood/ When women play upon their

⁸¹The operative word here, perhaps, is now. Once again Meredith leaves the final question of her relationship with the other man ambiguous.

womanhood,/ It means, a Season gone" (the Season gone image here indicating the death of romantic love, as in Stanza XIII).

And yet, at the next minute, the husband recognizes that he may be simply fooling himself as to her flirtation ("I doubt/ But I am duped"), and admits that his own imagination may be suspect ("That nun-like look waylays/ My fancy"); and the stanza then ends in a frenzy of cross-purposes, including an appeal to her for some sign that her old ideal love for him remains, a demand to himself (and perhaps to her) to "Pluck out the eyes of pride" and renew their physical relationship regardless, and finally a repulsion of her and a reassertion of pride: "Never! though I die thirsting. Go thy ways!"

Line 6. cruel lovely pallor. As Friedman points out ("The Jangled Harp," p. 24), this image is a repetition of the overcast star motif.

XXV

You like not that French novel? Tell me why.
 You think it quite unnatural. Let us see.
 The actors are, it seems, the usual three:
 Husband, and wife, and lover. She—but fie!
 In England we'll not hear of it. Edmond,
 The lover, her devout chagrin doth share;
 Blanc-mange and absinthe are his penitent fare,
 Till his pale aspect makes her over-fond:
 So, to preclude fresh sin, he tries rosbif.
 Meantime the husband is no more abused:
 Auguste forgives her ere the tear is used.
 Then hangeth all on one tremendous IF:--
If she will choose between them. She does choose;
 And takes her husband, like a proper wife.
 Unnatural? My dear, these things are life:
 And life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.

In an ironic commentary which probably reflects Meredith's own scorn for the popular fiction of his day, the husband questions the wife's distaste for a French novel she has been reading. The characters in the novel form the proverbial triangle--husband, wife, and lover--the fictional

wife having apparently been guilty of sexual infidelity, though English censorship (both social and literary) forbids any explicit mention of her crime. Her "devout chagrin" for her indiscretion is shared by her lover, who starves himself on sweet dessert and bitter liquor, flavored with wormwood, until his "pale aspect" reawakens her affections, at which point, "to preclude fresh sin," he tries roastbeef (Meredith here skillfully parodying a number of the traditions of sentimental romance, with its pale lovers, its bitter-sweet emotions, and its morbid asceticism). The wife, in the meantime, confesses to her husband, who forgives her "ere the tear is used," provided of course that she will choose between them, which she does, "and takes her husband, like a proper wife."

The last two lines of this stanza have frequently been quoted--out of context--as a justification for Meredith's own treatment of a painful domestic triangle in Modern Love. That Meredith may have intended such out-of-context reverberations for the lines seems quite probable, and certainly the "life" reflected in the poem as a whole does prove "worthy of the Muse," but it is also quite clear that, within the context of the stanza, the husband intends the lines ironically and, by the same token, there can be little doubt that Meredith himself would find in the kind of French novel in question, with its almost farcical characterizations and its arbitrary denouement, very little that resembles either life or art.

As in a number of other instances, it is not likely that the husband in this stanza addresses the wife in actual fact, but rather that his ironic commentary on her distaste for the French novel occurs strictly in interior monologue. By indirection, however, this stanza adds further weight to the impression (created by the four preceding stanzas) that the wife has been experiencing strong feelings of guilt in her affair with the

other man, that there is no longer any overt relationship between them, and that she is feeling the need for a reconciliation with her husband. The major new note struck here is the husband's coldly detached and cynical pleasure in his position as the "wronged husband." It is as though he feels instinctively that the balance of power has shifted in his "unholy battle" (Stanza VIII) with his wife, and that he is now more nearly in a position to name the terms.

XXVI

Love ere he bleeds, an eagle in high skies,
 Has earth beneath his wings: from reddened eve
 He views the rosy dawn. In vain they weave
 The fatal web below while far he flies.
 But when the arrow strikes him, there's a change.
 He moves but in the track of his spent pain,
 Whose red drops are the links of a harsh chain,
 Binding him to the ground, with narrow range.
 A subtle serpent then has Love become.
 I had the eagle in my bosom erst:
 Henceforward with the serpent I am cursed.
 I can interpret where the mouth is dumb.
 Speak, and I see the side-lie of a truth.
 Perchance my heart may pardon you this deed:
 But be no coward:—you that make Love bleed,
 You must bear all the venom of his tooth!

Stanza XXVI is extremely dense in imagery and complex in meaning. The "eagle," as Friedman writes in connection with the related falcon image in L, "is a sun-striving bird, one who dwells in remote heavens and inaccessible crags, functioning therefore as the vehicle of bodiless, spiritless, romantic love."⁸² The sun, as we have already seen in the discussion of X, is itself a symbol of over-idealized, egoistic love, and a quotation from In the Woods, previously cited in that discussion, bears out Friedman's interpretation of the eagle-falcon symbolism:

⁸²"The Jangled Harp," p. 17.

I looked on the sun
 That clouds or is blinding aglow:
 And the love around had more of wing
Than substance, and of spirit none.
 (p. 344)

Such a bird, then, (and such Love) "has earth beneath his wings" in a pejorative sense—that is, it is divorced from the real conditions of nature. The next image cluster, "from reddened eve/ He views the rosy dawn," recalls the "amber cradle near the sun's decline" image in XI. In that stanza, the "infant" sun (i.e., the future) was seen as dead (the ideal Love itself being conceived of as already destroyed), but here the conceit is of the eagle of Love, from his high (and non-literal) perspective in the sky, being able to follow the descent and arising of the sun without ever losing sight of it. Thus here, as later in XXX, over-idealized Love is seen as misleading one as to the fact of death, or change—rather than comprehending it and seeing hope beyond it, as imaged in the passage from the Hymn to Colour previously quoted in the discussion of Stanza XI (see p. 91).

The next conceit, "In vain they weave/ The fatal web below while far he flies," is more difficult to interpret with certainty. The web image itself, Friedman identifies as part of the snare-bat-cage-pit-beast cluster,⁸³ and this cluster, as we have seen in other references to Friedman, generally reflects the protagonist's sensualism. But in the present context, it is evident that the web of sensualism neither weaves itself, nor "catches" the eagle of Love; what "strikes" the eagle is the "arrow" in line 5. First, then, we should consider what does weave the web. The subject of the weaving action, "they," I would identify as the passions,

⁸³"The Jangled Harp," p. 19.

since the passions have an obvious contributory relationship to sensualism, since the passions are "below," and since in XLIII, the husband, having reached a better understanding of his nature, specifically recognizes that "Passions spin the plot:/ We are betrayed by what is false within." Similarly, in The Woods of Westermain, "the passions interweave" (p. 200); and in With the Persuader, Aphrodite's nymphs, whom I take to be the passions, are described as follows:

And here they flicker round the maze
 Bewildering him in heart and head:
 And here they wear the close demure
 With subtle peeps to reassure:
 Others parade where love has bled
And of its crimson weave their mesh.
 (pp. 538-539)

The gist of lines 3 through 5, then, seems to be that sentimental Love also blinds one to the truth of one's own nature, to an awareness of one's sensual impulses, until the sentimental illusion is shattered, until the "eagle" is struck, whereupon one discovers oneself bound in the meshes of one's sensualism. Here again, it might be remembered that Meredith conceives of the passions as neither good nor bad in themselves, but as demanding recognition and disciplined integration with the rest of the personality. The sentimentalist, unused to recognizing his passions as such, is ill equipped to discipline them, and thus finds himself easily reversed to a sensualist, tending still to avoid responsibility for his passions by projecting them onto some exterior force, which he conceives of as betraying him. This latter interpretation would, then, partially account for the eagle-serpent dichotomy in this stanza--the snake-venom-poison motif being used throughout the poem to reflect the husband's projected conception of the wife as a seductive betrayer.

Friedman identifies the pronoun "they" in the above passage as referring simply to "others" [other people],⁸⁴ an interpretation which I would accept as only part of the implications of the imagery, a more meaningful implication having to do with the passions, as I have suggested. I do, however, agree with his subsequent observation that the "arrow" which is capable of wounding sentimental Love must be "distrust" between the two lovers,⁸⁵ and not any interference from outside, an observation which may be substantiated by the following passage from a later short poem

Fragments:

Love is winged for two,
In the worst he weathers,
When their hearts are tied;
But if they divide,
 O too true!
 Cracks a globe, and feathers, feathers,
Feathers all the ground bestrew.
 (p. 392)

The imagery of lines 6 through 8 of Stanza XXVI adds still another facet to the meaning thus far developed. The "harsh chain," which binds the eagle of Love "to the ground, with narrow range," is, I think, a reference to the sentimentalist's inability to make productive use of Time, once his illusion of an ideal permanence for Love has been shattered. Thus "he moves but in the track of his spent pain"—i.e., in the track of his dead past (cf., the conceit in X of the "wretch condemned," who must "drag on Love's nerveless body thro' all time").

The "eagle" of Love, once it has been struck by the "arrow" of distrust, is transformed into a "subtle serpent," itself a symbol of distrust

⁸⁴"The Fire of Renewal," p. 356.

⁸⁵See both "The Fire of Renewal," p. 356, and "The Jangled Harp," p. 18.

and of hate as well as of betrayal. This "antagonism of love and hate--a hate created from that love," as Friedman describes it, "is as that between the bird of prey and the crawling things which are its prey,"⁸⁶ and he further illustrates the use of this antagonism in Meredith's work with the following passage from The Nuptials of Attila:

Eagle [Attila], snakes these women are:
Take them on the wing!
(p. 295)

The husband had "had the eagle in [his] bosom" previously, but "henceforward with the serpent [he is] cursed"--a curse by which he can "interpret where the mouth is dumb," or, in speech, "see the side-lie of a truth." Friedman describes this peculiar ability as "a curse of second-sight" (*Ibid.*), but this, it seems to me, is a rather unclear term in itself, and the passage asks some further interpretation. In XLVIII, the husband exclaims that "Our inmost hearts had opened each to each./ We drank the pure daylight of honest speech," but "alas! that was the fatal draught" (snake-venom-poison motif), and their reconciliation was "destroyed by subtleties." And again in L, the objective narrator observes:

Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When hot for certainities in this our life!--

Even with these related passages, however, the idea remains somewhat obscure, and what I would offer is admittedly an extrapolation rather than strictly an interpretation. What this fatal subtlety consists in, it seems to me, is an unwillingness to accept the main intention in human relationships (specifically in the love relationship); it consists in

⁸⁶"The Fire of Renewal," p. 356.

holding the loved one accountable for his every thought and impulse, as well as for his overt actions and central emotions, and it thus amounts to an over-idealized demand for perfection in human nature, and an egoistic demand for certainly (Stanza L) in an uncertain world. Because in XLVIII the husband admits to having felt impulses of attraction and love for another woman, the wife is unwilling to accept his main (and true) intention in seeking a reconciliation with her; and similarly, in the present stanza, even though in his "heart" the husband may intuitively "pardon" his wife of any intentional guilt in her "deed," yet because she has shattered his egoistic illusion of perfection, he now demands that she "bear all the venom of [Love's] tooth."⁸⁷

In this stanza, as in the previous one, the husband seems aware of a shift in the balance of power between them, and again he seems to take some sardonic (though less detached) pleasure in his position as the wronged husband. Structurally, it is interesting to note that this shift in the balance of power comes in the two stanzas which are the numerical center of the poem.

XXVII

Distraction is the panacea, Sir!
 I hear my oracle of Medicine say.
 Doctor! that same specific yesterday
 I tried, and the result will not deter
 A second trial. Is the devil's line
 Of golden hair, or raven black, composed?
 And does a cheek, like any sea-shell rosed,
 Or clear as widowed sky, seem most divine?
 No matter, so I taste forgetfulness.
 And if the devil snare me, body and mind,

⁸⁷A somewhat related capacity may also be seen in XLIV in the wife's ability to see "through simulation to the bone."

Here gratefully I score:--he seemed kind,
 When not a soul would comfort my distress!
 O sweet new world, in which I rise new made!
 O Lady, once I gave love: now I take!
 Lady, I must be flattered. Shouldst thou wake
 The passion of a demon, be not afraid.

It is ironic, but I think psychologically true to experience, that the husband should now launch a philandering episode of his own at a time when the wife seems repentant for her flirtation and silently anxious for a reconciliation. In answer to his doctor's recommendation of "Distraction" as a "panacea," he replies that "that same specific yesterday/ I tried, and the result will not deter/ A second trial"--a reference apparently to his previous abortive attraction to the golden-haired Lady mentioned in Stanza XIV and again alluded to in Stanza XIX. In the present stanza, the contrast in lines 6-8 has been identified by Friedman (correctly I think) as between the Lady and his wife, not simply between blondes and brunettes in general, as a cursory reading might suggest. Which is the most devilish, the "golden hair" of his Lady or the "raven" hair (cf., the dark rain image, Stanza V) of his wife? Or which is most divine, the "rosed" cheeks of the Lady (bloom-covered in Stanza XXXII) or the pale, "clear" cheeks (the cruel lovely pallor, Stanza XXIV) of his wife? "No matter," he says, which is the most sensually appealing or which the most ideal, so long as he tastes "forgetfulness."⁸⁸ He had--again as Friedman notes--been unwilling to "drink oblivion of a day" in Stanza XII, for as he says in XII, "So shorten I the stature of my soul." Now he seeks that oblivion. (*Ibid.*)

⁸⁸Cf., "The Fire of Renewal," p. 357 (The argument here roughly follows Friedman's; the parenthesized references to other stanzas, however, and some elaborations of phrasing are my own).

And if the "devil" should "snare" him, "body and mind," then he should gratefully note that "he seemed kind,/ When not a soul would comfort my distress!" In the body, mind, and soul juxtaposition of lines 10-12, there seems to be a play on the Blood, Brain, and Spirit relationships (the Meredithian triad) worked out in detail in Meredith's later poetry, and discussed at length in the introduction to this chapter (see pp. 29-37). In Modern Love the "devil," or any demoniac, image may be taken as symbolic of the unbridled passions, or sensualism (cf., "the passion of a demon," line 16, and the whole of Stanza XXXIII), sensualism being also reflected in the present stanza by the "snare" image. What the husband seems to be saying, then, in the present stanza, is that, if his unbridled passions should ensnare him, body and mind (that is, if the Blood should seduce the Brain into cynically cloaking or condoning its demands), then he would actively welcome such a state (which is, in further Meredithian parlance, the sensualist-cynic form of Egoism or imbalance), because, in his present distress, not a soul would comfort him (that is, no spiritual value, neither the memory of a meaningful past relationship nor the hope of a meaningful continuity into the future, now seems possible to him--as I have suggested elsewhere, Meredith's conception of Spirit or Soul is inextricably connected with Time and with enduring value: although the balanced personality must comprehend the fact of change, it must also keep faith in the principle of future value for present moral decision).

Continuing with the present stanza, the husband, having cynically renounced the value of the past and of a meaningful continuity into the future, ironically echoes Miranda's famous "O brave new world" speech from The Tempest with his "O sweet new world, in which I rise new made!"⁸⁹ and

⁸⁹Elizabeth C. Wright, p. 7, calls attention to this Miranda parallel.

warns his Lady that, whereas once he gave love, now he takes. His ego must be flattered, and if all his repressed sexuality should break through, she should "be not afraid." As Friedman again notes, the husband is now ready to take his place among the "goat-legged buyers" of the marketplace (Stanza XIX).⁹⁰

Line 8. Or clear as widowed sky. The curious image of the widowed sky can perhaps be interpreted to mean a sky bereft of clouds, though the image also seems to suggest a pale sky, not a vividly blue one. The quality of bereavement inherent in the widow locution does seem appropriate to the wife in this context.

XXVIII

I must be flattered. The imperious
Desire speaks out. Lady, I am content
To play with you the game of Sentiment,
And with you enter on paths perilous;
But if across your beauty I throw light,
To make it threefold, it must be all mine.
First secret; then avowed. For I must shine
Envied,—I, lessened in my proper sight!
Be watchful of your beauty, Lady dear!
How much hangs on that lamp you cannot tell.
Most earnestly I pray you, tend it well:
And men shall see me as a burning sphere;
And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan
To be the God of such a grand sunflower!
I feel the promptings of Satanic power,
While you do homage unto me alone.

In what seems to be deliberate and rather grotesque posturing, the husband continues his demand for flattery. Again noting the urgency of his sexual desire, he tells his Lady that he is content to play with her "the game of Sentiment"—a game he had previously scorned to play with his wife (Stanza XIV), although he had later, to a degree, and partly to keep up appearances, played it with her in the dinner sequence in XVII. He is now ready to let his "Love's old time-piece to another set" (Stanza

⁹⁰"The Fire of Renewal," p. 357.

XIX), even though to do so may be to "enter on paths perilous"--perhaps a reference to the danger to the spirit of unchecked sensualism or perhaps simply a reference to the more objective social danger of an extramarital affair. In any event his main concern now is for his ego. Visualizing himself as a sun, he sees the "light" of his admiration as enhancing her beauty, but if it does so, her beauty must all be his; and if, for the moment, it is best that her love remain secret, it must later be avowed, for he must "shine/ Envied," though he knows that such a flirtation, and indeed such deliberate self-deception as he is now practicing, can only lessen his stature in his "proper sight."

Continuing with the "game," he urges his Lady to preserve well her beauty, for it is the "lamp" that reflects--and provides the measure for--his own attractiveness:

And men shall see me as a burning sphere;
And men shall mark you eyeing me, and groan
To be the God of such a grand sunflower!

Here, the importance that he places on his Lady's "eyeing" him should remind us of his sense of the irradiating power of his wife's glance in Stanza III:

Only mark
The rich light striking out from her on him!
Ha! what a sense it is when her eyes swim
Across the man she singles, leaving dark
All else!

And the repeated play on the sun image in this stanza should, of course, remind us of its earlier use in Stanza X:

Love's jealous woods about the sun are curled;
At least, the sun far brighter there did beam.⁹¹

⁹¹Friedman, in "The Fire of Renewal," p. 358, identifies the sun image in this stanza and comments on the lamp-reflector conceit, but he does not trace the relationships to Stanzas III and X, as I have done.

What the husband actually does in this stanza, then, is to repeat--for the most part consciously, cynically, and perhaps with some self-mockery--what was most false and egoistic in his original relationship with his wife. This parallelism between the affair with the Lady and his original relationship with his wife will, in fact, continue throughout the following stanzas, though in certain of the later stanzas his repetition of the sentimental errors of that earlier love will become less of a conscious "game" and more a matter of actual sentimental belief. For the time being, however, the husband is still quite aware that such self-exaltation as he is now achieving exists mainly on the sensual level:

I feel the promptings of Satanic power,
While you do homage unto me alone.

Lionel Stevenson, commenting on the autobiographical origin of some of the incidents of Modern Love, writes:

The only major episode . . . which seems to depart from the real events is the cold-blooded affair of the husband with another woman, after he becomes aware of his wife's infidelity. There is the possibility that this, too, was a confession of what actually happened, though no corroborating evidence happens to survive. But Meredith probably invented the episode to give symmetry to the situation and also to make it typical of the artificial social complexities he intended to impugn.⁹²

And William T. Going, in an earlier article--in answer to a suggestion by R. E. Sencourt, in The Life of George Meredith (New York, 1929), p. 109, that the autobiographical source for *My Lady* was Meredith's friend Janet Duff Gordon--argues that, although Meredith's "pleasant friendship" with Miss Duff Gordon at, or about, the time he was writing Modern Love may have provided him with some character material for *My Lady*, the specific incidents depicted in the poem, such as the meeting between Madam and

⁹²The Ordeal of George Meredith, p. 104.

My Lady (XXXVI) and the writing of a love letter to My Lady in the presence of Madam (XXXIII), are chronologically inapplicable to his friendship with Miss Duff Gordon, since she was only a child of nine or ten years at the time when Meredith and his first wife, Mary Ellen Nicolls, had formerly known the Duff Gordons, Meredith then losing contact with the Duff Gordons and with Janet until after his final separation from his wife.⁹³

Without attempting to shed any new light on the question of the actual possible autobiographical sources for Modern Love, I would suggest that the internal technical evidence of the poem itself and the evidence of its relationship to Meredith's other poems might indicate that the husband's affair was, as Stevenson supposes, an "invented episode"—that is, its contribution to the "symmetry" of the poem, to borrow another of Stevenson's phrases, goes considerably beyond the obvious symmetry of providing a counterpart to the wife's flirtation with the other man. As I have suggested above, the really significant parallelism is between the husband's affair with My Lady and his original relationship with his wife—both being characterized by the husband-speaker, whether "consciously" and "mockingly" or "subconsciously" and "sincerely," by the same kinds of sentimental images and conceits, if not, as is frequently the case, by the same images and conceits. A further interesting point is that the sentimental imagery applied both to the philandering episode with My Lady and to the original relationship with the wife closely resembles the imagery in many of Meredith's youthful poems, published in the 1851 edition, and written for the most part at, or about, the time of his courtship with Mary Ellen Nicolls. This resemblance of the Modern Love imagery to the

⁹³"A Note on 'My Lady' of Modern Love," pp. 311-314.

imagery of the early poems, I have noted specifically in the discussion of Stanza IX--that stanza depicting the relationship with the wife--and similar resemblances will be noted in my discussions of Stanzas XXXIX and XLV--these latter stanzas depicting the episode with My Lady. In a number of other stanzas in both sections of Modern Love the resemblances are more piecemeal, but might, I believe, be documented in a more extensive study.

Ironically then, as I am suggesting, Meredith's courtship of Mary Ellen Nicolls and his own early poetic effusions may have provided the significant imaginal sources for both the husband's original love relationship with the wife and his philandering episode with My Lady--the slight surface characterization of My Lady (the "golden hair" and "rosed" cheeks (XXVII); the "wit" and the "Common Sense" (XXXI); and the "nose . . . not fashioned aptly to express/ Her character of large-browed steadfastness" (XXXVI) being merely superimposed by Meredith on the earlier stock of sentimental imagery and experience, these latter superficial characteristics being suggested to Meredith quite possibly by his "pleasant friendship" with Janet Duff Gordon, as *Going* supposes.⁹⁴

⁹⁴Other than tacitly assuming, usually for purposes of footnote comparisons to other Meredith poems, that Meredith himself and his first wife, Mary Ellen Nicolls, are the psychological and temperamental prototypes for the husband and wife of the poem (as is commonly assumed), I have generally avoided the question of the amount of autobiographical data directly reflected in Modern Love--such a question not being pertinent, as it seems to me, to the kind of technically-oriented study in which I am engaged. In the present case, however, I have felt that my own technical observations were pertinent to the autobiographical question, a somewhat different matter, and I have felt as well that they were worthy of elaboration as technical observations in their own right.

XXIX

Am I failing? For no longer can I cast
 A glory round about this head of gold.
 Glory she wears, but springing from the mould;
 Not like the consecration of the Past!
 Is my soul beggared? Something more than earth
 I cry for still: I cannot be at peace
 In having Love upon a mortal lease.
 I cannot take the woman at her worth!
 Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
 Our human nakedness, and could endow
 With spiritual splendour a white brow
 That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?
 A kiss is but a kiss now! and no wave
 Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea.
 But, as you will! we'll sit contentedly,
 And eat our pot of honey on the grave.

The callous cynicism and especially the thin veil of sentimentalism which he has attempted to cast over his new affair with My Lady is not easy to sustain: "Glory she wears, but springing from the mould." He knows all too well that his attraction to her is mostly sensual and that--based on the flesh--it is manifestly impermanent. She is beautiful, but her beauty lacks the "consecration" that comes from a sense of shared experience and a sense of meaningful continuity, the kind of consecration he had once felt with his wife. "The present minus a past turns to ashes in his mouth," as Friedman puts it.⁹⁵

He feels his soul impoverished and begging for sustenance:

Something more than earth
 I cry for still: I cannot be at peace
 In having Love upon a mortal lease.

As is frequently the case with the highest flights of rhetoric in Modern Love, there echo in these lines both the cry of the sentimentalist, who demands for himself some ideal exemption from the pain and uncertainty of

⁹⁵"The Fire of Renewal," p. 358.

mortal experience, and the legitimate plea of the soul of man for some meaning and some cumulative value in his experience.

The sentimentalist's problem is that he cannot accept the sensual side of his own nature (the side so obviously subject to decay and death) and dreads to recognize its existence in the object of his love:

I cannot take the woman at her worth!
Where is the ancient wealth wherewith I clothed
Our human nakedness, and could endow
With spiritual splendour a white brow
That else had grinned at me the fact I loathed?⁹⁶

As Friedman comments: "According to the later Meredith, this is half right, but only half right. Man does contribute Spirit to Earth, but only after having realized her in her double aspect, after absorbing the fact of death into the fabric of joy."⁹⁷

In the Woods (previously alluded to in the discussions of Stanzas X and XXVI) may provide a helpful corroboration and illustration of Friedman's point here. In that poem Meredith states that the love one may find by looking above, by sun-gazing, is a "fitful thing," having "more of wing/ Than substance, and of spirit none," but he does not finally despair of the value of "love" or of the existence of "glory" and of a meaningful continuity of experience:

Then looked I on the green earth we are rooted in,
 Whereof we grow,
 And nothing of love it said,
 But gave me warnings of sin,
 And lessons of patience let fall,
 And told how pain was bred,
 And wherefore I was weak,

⁹⁶Cf., "What he hugs is loathed decay," The Woods of Westernmain, p. 199.

⁹⁷"The Fire of Renewal," p. 359.

And of good and evil at strife,
 And the struggle upward of all,
 And my choice of the glory of life:
 Was love farther to seek?
 (p. 344)

In the present stanza, however, the husband--no longer able to call on the kind of youthful idealism which could find in a kiss the "wave/ Of a great flood that whirls me to the sea" (cf., "When the renewed for ever of a kiss/ Whirls life within the shower of loosened hair!" Stanza XIII), the kind of happy fusion of an imagined permanence with an immediate joy in the senses which for a time obliterates all awareness of death and uncertainty--does despair of any more hard-won continuity of experience, and instead, in a renewed burst of cynicism, accepts as unavoidable the disharmony of the fact of death and the fact of joy. Sensualist-fashion, he will "eat [his] pot of honey on the grave"--an image whose shuddering grimness belies the apparent flippancy of its delivery.

XXX

What are we first? First, animals; and next
 Intelligences at a leap; on whom
 Pale lies the distant shadow of the tomb,
 And all that draweth on the tomb for text.
 Into which state comes Love, the crowning sun:
 Beneath whose light the shadow loses form.
 We are the lords of life, and life is warm.
 Intelligence and instinct now are one.
 But nature says: 'My children most they seem
 When they least know me: therefore I decree
 That they shall suffer.' Swift doth young Love flee,
 And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream.
 Then if we study Nature we are wise.
 Thus do the few who live but with the day:
 The scientific animals are they.--
 Lady, this is my sonnet to your eyes.

The frustrated sentimentalism, the flippancy, and the inherent revolution of the preceding stanza resolve themselves into an attempt to

generalize and intellectualize his position in XXX. Again, as in XIII and elsewhere, many of the husband's observations closely parallel tenets of Meredith's mature philosophy, but again the final implications of the stanza represent a failure of insight and a cynical inversion of the mature philosophy.

Men are, as the husband observes, "first animals"--i.e., creatures of the senses and of instinctual passion--"and next/ Intelligences at a leap"--the Brain or intelligence being a later and higher development than the Blood or instinct, both in terms of the evolution of the species and (at least figuratively) in terms of the development of the individual. And with Brain comes the awareness of death and of mutability in all its forms--"the distant shadow of the tomb,/ And all that draweth on the tomb for text." But sentimental "Love, the crowning sun" (which, in In the Woods, "clouds or is blinding aglow," p. 344) blinds one to the facts of death and mutability: "the shadow loses form." In this rapture of Love, the ego expands, "We are the lords of life, and life is warm./ Intelligence and instinct now are one." But however delightful such a state may be, and however appropriate it may be for the young lover (cf., my discussion of the youthful dancers on the village green in XVIII, pp. 106-107), nevertheless it is a misleading state--the danger being that the lover will confuse his intelligence and his instinct and egoistically conceive of himself as no longer impelled by instinctual passion at all, but as guided by a kind of ideal intelligence--this being, perhaps, the negative meaning of "Intelligence and instinct now are one."

"Nature," however, proclaims such a conception an illusion, lovers being most under the influence of natural sexual drives when they least think it: "My children most they seem/ When they least know me." And

nature decrees that man shall know himself better through suffering, that such an easy dream-state shall be shattered: "Swift doth young Love flee,/ And we stand wakened, shivering from our dream."

Thus far, as I have suggested, the husband's observations do parallel Meredith's later thought. In The Woods of Westermain, for example, a similar evolutionary process is expressed:

Pleasures that through blood run sane,
Quickening spirit from the brain.
Each of each in sequent birth,
Blood and brain and spirit, three
(Say the deepest gnomes of Earth),
Join for true felicity.
(pp. 201-202)

Spirit, however, as In the Woods makes clear, does not blind one to the facts of death and change, as does sentimental Love, but instead grows out of the joy of love (pleasures of the blood) tempered by the brain's "sane" acceptance and endeavor within the framework of these facts. Thus, the husband is again in accord with the later philosophy in observing that Nature decrees suffering, and the shattering of the sentimental illusions of young lovers.

Where he fails in insight, however, is in his inability to see any value yet accruing from the love experience or any hope for permanent value in the continuing struggle for a meaningful love relationship, and instead falls back on a cynical philosophy of living "but with the day"--that is, living for the immediate sensual gratification--the philosophy of the "scientific animals," as he calls them. He has, in fact, come round to a philosophical justification for emulating the peasants on the village green in XVIII, who appear to "have the secret of the bull and lamb." But, as I pointed out in the discussion of that stanza, there is, legitimately, no such "secret" for man, and only despair of something more

meaningful could counsel seeking for one. In accord with this interpretation, Friedman ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 360) documents Meredith's probable connotation for the word "scientific" in this stanza with the following quotation from Foresight and Patience:

For neither of us has it [this Age] any care;
Its learning is through Science to despair.
(p. 416)

In the present instance, the husband's cynicism is, perhaps, only a thin veil for his despair.

Although highly compressed in imagery and rather confusing, another passage from The Woods of Westernmain seems also to provide a commentary pointing to the falseness of the husband's viewpoint in the final implications of this stanza:

Young Impulsion spouts to sink;
Luridness and lustre link;
'Tis your come and go of breath;
Mirrored pants the Life, the Death;
Each of either reaped and sown:
Rosiest rosy wanes to crone.
See you so? your senses drift;
'Tis a shuttle weaving swift.
Look with spirit past the sense,
Spirit shines in permanence.
(p. 200)

Unable to "look with spirit past the sense," the husband does conclude with his cynical "live but with the day" proclamation, ironically offering it to his Lady--in a parody of the courtly idealization of love⁹⁸--as a "sonnet to [her] eyes."

XXXI

This golden head has wit in it. I live
Again, and a far higher life, near her.
Some women like a young philosopher;

⁹⁸Cf., Friedman, "The Fire of Renewal," p. 360.

Perchance because he is diminutive.
 For woman's manly god must not exceed
 Proportions of the natural nursing size.
 Great poets and great sages draw no prize
 With women: but the little lap-dog breed,
 Who can be hugged, or on a mantel-piece
 Perched up for adoration, these obtain
 Her homage. And of this we men are vain?
 Of this! 'Tis ordered for the world's increase!
 Small flattery! Yet she has that rare gift
 To beauty, Common Sense. I am approved.
 It is not half so nice as being loved,
 And yet I do prefer it. What's my drift?

Having found some solace in his intellectualizing, he decides to give over his "game of sentiment" with My Lady, and instead approach their relationship on a plane of mutual intellectual admiration, apparently also for the time holding in abeyance his sexual attraction to her. Here too, however, he finds little sustenance for his ego. Even while he is trying to persuade himself that he lives again, "and a far higher life," in her regard, he sardonically suspects that most women admire men only because men are small enough to need their admiration and because men thus fulfill the mother instinct in women (lines 3-5). In a curious mixture of posturing and self-belittlement, he tells himself that

Great poets and great sages draw no prize
 With women: but the little lap-dog breed,
 Who can be hugged, or on a mantle-piece
 Perched up for adoration, these obtain
 Her homage.

And continuing with this same mordant vision, he sees this combination of petty male vanity and delusive female mother instinct as "ordered for the world's increase!" "Small flattery!" as he tells himself. His bitterness here is perhaps directed mainly toward his wife (in V, as we may remember, she had "treated him as something that is tame"); and he tries to persuade himself that at least his golden-haired Lady has the "Common Sense" to escape this--as he sees it--typical female syndrome, and simply "approve"

his mind rather than "adore" him. Her approval, however, "is not half so nice as being loved," and yet he tries to tell himself that he prefers it, and ends by wondering what he does want. The final image in this stanza suggests rather subtly the ocean-wave motif--which, as I have shown in my own addition to Friedman's image clusters, is used by Meredith throughout Modern Love to represent the passions (see pp. 53-56). Thus, whereas in XX, the husband had boasted that "The wind that fills my sails/ Propels; but I am helmsman," now he can only ask himself rather plaintively, "What's my drift?"

Lines 9 and 10. or on a mantel-piece/ Perched up for adoration. Carl H. Ketcham suggests that this image may contain "a reference to the celebrated 'Count' Borowlaski (Borulwaski, Boruslawski), a Polish dwarf who, after successfully exhibiting himself for many years, died in Durham in 1837, aged ninety-eight. Walter Scott, in a letter to B. S. Morritt, July 24, 1814 (J. S. Lockhart, Life of Sir Walter Scott, 1837 ed., III, 131), remarks that if Waverly had married Flora, 'she would have set him up upon the chimney-piece, as Count Borowlaski's wife used to do to him.'" Ketcham continues that "the comparison, appropriate enough in itself, becomes markedly ironic if we assume that Meredith may have known the tiny Count's reputation for being witty, handsome, and successfully amorous--everything that the husband would wish to be in the eyes of 'My Lady,' reduced, in his abrupt mood of self-contempt, to ridiculous miniature."⁹⁹

XXXII

Full faith I have she holds that rarest gift
To beauty, Common Sense. To see her life
With her fair visage an inverted sky
Bloom-covered, while the underlids uplift,
Would almost wreck the faith; but when her mouth
(Can it kiss sweetly? sweetly!) would address
The inner me that thirsts for her no less,
And has so long been languishing in drouth,
I feel that I am matched; that I am man!
One restless corner of my heart or head,
That holds a dying something never dead,

⁹⁹"Meredith's Modern Love XXXI, 7-11," The Explicator, XVII (October 1958), Item 7.

Still frets, though Nature giveth all she can.
 It means, that woman is not, I opine,
 Her sex's antidote. Who seeks the asp
 For serpents' bites? 'Twould calm me could I clasp
 Shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine!

In Stanza XXXI the husband seemed torn between his desire for intellectual approval and his desire for a warm if cloying adoration. Now, in XXXII, his intellectual vanity, his sentimentalism, and sensualism (the elements of Brain, Spirit, and Blood in egoistic disarray) chase one another through his consciousness with an almost comic-opera rapidity.

The stanza begins with him still trying to convince himself that his Lady has that 'rare gift among women, Common Sense' (or, to put the issue more accurately, that this is the element in her which attracts him), but to see the bloom in her cheeks as she lies back to gaze dreamily at the sky "would almost wreck the faith"—would make him suspect, in fact, that the appeal is operating on a far more sensory level (the shipwreck imagery, as we may remember, is a corollary of the ocean-wave motif--itself a representative of the passions). And even as he tells himself that her platonic understanding is what he has so long been needing to appease his spiritual thirst ("the inner me"), he is distracted by the sensuous thought of how sweetly she can kiss. And again even as he tries to convince himself that her intellectual understanding will provide him with the integration of his diverse yearnings that he has been missing--"I feel that I am matched; that I am man!"--he is in fact now so confused that he no longer knows whether it is his "heart" or his "head" that is bothering him, but certainly something in him "still frets" for "a dying something never dead" (perhaps for the "consecration of the past," Stanza XXIX), "though Nature giveth all she can."

Friedman, in commenting on these lines, quotes the following passage from I Chafe at Darkness:

But in me something clipped of wing
 Within its ring
Frets; for I have lost what made
 The dawn-breeze magic, and the twilight beam
 A hand with tidings o'er the glade
 Waving seem.

(p. 181)

According to Friedman, the loss felt by the husband in the Modern Love lines is specifically

the de-symbolization of his central symbols, that perspective which fuses joy and sorrow, life and death. Nature does all she can, but as we have demonstrated, she does not provide that perspective--man does. We have seen how, in section xxix, he could not love my Lady fully because he could not sustain the requisite integrative sense; and now, although her presence provides relief, he still has that deep-seated feeling of restlessness which is a symptom of something gone wrong.¹⁰⁰

In the present stanza, the husband can, indeed, only conclude, in a resurgence of bitterness, that "woman is not, . . . / Her sex's antidote. Who seeks the asp/ For serpents' bites?" (here extending the serpent motif to all womankind); and, in a new outburst of sensualism, wish that he might clasp "shrieking Bacchantes with their souls of wine"--and thus "calm," apparently, his 'inner thirst,' line 7 (a final example of the kind of ironic wordplay which has characterized this whole stanza and artistically illuminated the comic confusion of the husband's mental state). The thirst motif has, of course, appeared previously--in IX, he had resisted the temptation to squeeze his wife "like an intoxicating grape" and again in XXIV, he had preferred to "die thirsting"--but the specifically comic factor here is that throughout most of the present

¹⁰⁰"The Fire of Renewal," p. 362.

stanza he has been trying to convince himself that his thirst for My Lady is a spiritual and intellectual one. Yet certainly her quiet "Common Sense" is a far cry from the "shrieking Bacchantes" he would now clasp.

XXXIII

'In Paris, at the Louvre, there have I seen
The sumptuously-feathered angel pierce
Prone Lucifer, descending. Looked he fierce,
Showing the fight a fair one? Too serene!
The young Pharsalians did not disarray
Less willingly their locks of floating silk:
That suckling mouth of his upon the milk
Of heaven might still be feasting through the fray.
Oh, Raphael! when men the Fiend do fight,
They conquer not upon such easy terms.
Half serpent in the struggle grow these worms.
And does he grow half human, all is right.'
This to my Lady in a distant spot,
Upon the theme: While mind is mastering clay,
Gross clay invades it. If the spy you play,
My wife, read this! Strange love-talk, is it not?

Forced once again (in XXXII) to recognize the strength of his sexual drive, he sets out on a new round of generalizing, his intellectual objectivity perhaps aided this time by the physical absence of My Lady-- apparently away for the moment "in a distant spot" (line 13). In an emblematic commentary on Raphael's picture of St. Michael slaying the fiend, he comments critically that the spruce young archangel looks "too serene" for hard fighting, "like the young Roman dandies at the battle of Pharsalia."¹⁰¹ In the real struggle between men and devil, men become "half serpent," and it is fortunate if the Fiend grows "half human." As stated in the discussion of XXVII, the devil motif in Modern Love may be roughly equated with man's sensual nature, so that what the husband here recognizes--in a more or less negative vein--is that some integration

¹⁰¹Trevelyan, "Notes," The Poetical Works, p. 583.

between Brain and Blood is an absolutely necessary function of human growth—"while mind is mastering clay,/ Gross clay invades it." This is "strange love-talk" for one who has been attempting to deny his sensual nature, and marks some advancement in the husband's intellectual insight--an advancement which, as Friedman notes ("The Jangled Harp," p. 22), is also signified by his application of the serpent and worm imagery to men (and thus to himself) in this stanza, whereas previously he has applied them only to his wife and to feminine "treachery" in general. That his insight here is only intellectual, however, and not capable of changing the basically negative tenor of his mood, is suggested by the sardonic pleasure he seems to take in the thought of his wife's bewilderment, should she spy on the letter he is writing.

XXXIV

Madam would speak with me. So, now it comes:
 The Deluge or else Fire! She's well; she thanks
 My husbandship. Our chain on silence clanks.
 Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs.
 Am I quite well? Most excellent in health!
 The journals, too, I diligently peruse.
 Vesuvius is expected to give news:
 Niagara is no noisier. By stealth
 Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes. She's glad
 I'm happy, says her quivering under-lip.
 'And are not you?' 'How can I be?' 'Take ship!
 For happiness is somewhere to be had.'
 'Nowhere for me!' Her voice is barely heard.
 I am not melted, and make no pretence.
 With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense.
 Niagara or Vesuvius is deferred.

In XXXIV it is even more apparent that his advance in intellectual understanding in XXXIII has not brought with it any release of emotion. In bargaining "for a cure" in his affair with My Lady, "contempt" has well-nigh killed the "nobler agony" (XIV): he no longer experiences much conscious suffering himself, but can now coldly watch his wife "bear all

the venom of [Love's] tooth" (XXVI). When she comes to him now, apparently feeling even more strongly than in XXII the need for a reconciliation, he not only will not speak first to help her, but heads off her own attempt to speak--either in tears or in anger ("So, now it comes:/ The Deluge or else Fire!")--with a polite inquiry as to her health. She answers him with a terse and equally polite affirmative, and their "chain on silence clanks." The chain image, as we may recall from Stanza XXVI, is a sign of the sentimentalist's bondage to the narrow confines of his dead past ("the track of his spent pain"), once his illusion of an ideal permanence for love has been shattered. In XXXIV this inability to accept change, to make productive use of time, is further imaged by the phrase "Time leers between, above his twiddling thumbs."

In the wake of this enervating silence which their polite exchange has produced, she can only weakly return his question, which he, from the vantage point of his ego-salving "distraction" with My Lady, can answer with some expansiveness: "Most excellent in health!" His doctor's "panacea" has in fact returned him to at least mental activity--"The journals, too, I diligently peruse"--as he complacently tells his wife.

At this point the account of their conversation becomes clearly non-literal (as is the case in a number of stanzas), reflecting not the actual geographical trivia that the husband recites to her from his scientific journals, but his sardonic and clinical reading of her own emotions: "Vesuvius is expected to give news:/ Niagara is no noisier"--a clever expansion of the wordplay in line 2 which shows that the wife is still hovering between anger and tears. As each attempts to keep firm his own defenses, "by stealth" their eyes "dart scrutinizing snakes" to

find some weakness in the other's defenses (the husband here again applying the serpent imagery to himself as well as to the wife).

In this present attempt to out-face one another, the wife is clearly the loser, her "quivering underlip" obviously and ironically belying any satisfaction--even the satisfaction of a successfully delivered sarcasm--which she attempts to claim in seeing him "happy." And, indeed, when he in turn asks if she is not happy, she gives way to an oblique bid for his sympathy: "'How can I be?'" And when he answers this with a direct and cold rejection--"'Take ship! / For happiness is somewhere to be had'"--she is reduced to an all but plaintive misery: "'Nowhere for me!'" The husband will not allow her, however, even the final release of her own emotion. Unmelted himself, he will make no gesture, even an insincere one, which might admit her continued attempt at expression, but instead, with more "commonplace," he freezes her, "tongue and sense." Speech and passion, tears and anger--"Niagara or Vesuvius"--all are frozen.

Here, again, Meredith's use of the first person, present tense narrative technique should be especially noticed, for such usage makes the clever wordplay of this stanza a function of the husband's cold intellectualism and sarcastic temperament, verging on sadism, and not simply a product of the author's witty imagination. In his "unholy battle" with his wife (Stanza VIII), the husband has 'grown base' indeed.

XXXV

It is no vulgar nature I have wived.
 Secretive, sensitive, she takes a wound
 Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swooned,
 And not a thought of vengeance had survived.
 No confidences has she: but relief
 Must come to one whose suffering is acute.
 O have a care of natures that are mute!

They punish you in acts: their steps are brief.
 What is she doing? What does she demand
 From Providence or me? She is not one
 Long to endure this torpidly, and shun
 The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand.
 At Forfeits during snow we played, and I
 Must kiss her. 'Well performed!' I said: then she:
 "'Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?'
 Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!

Despite the cold cruelty of which he is now capable, he cannot help but admire her quiet dignity in suffering--at the same time that he recognizes the potential danger in her muteness. In imagery that seems to reflect a pre-Freudian conception of the unconscious and of the repression of hostility, he notes how she

takes a wound
Deep to her soul, as if the sense had swooned,
And not a thought of vengeance had survived.

Such painfully repressed emotion, he knows, must find an outlet:

relief
 Must come to one whose suffering is acute.
 O have a care of natures that are mute!
 They punish you in acts: their steps are brief.

He has, in fact, a foreboding that she might attempt suicide--the means of suicide here suggested again foreshadowing (as in Stanza I) the actual means of her death at the end of the poem:

She is not one
 Long to endure this torpidly, and shun
 The drugs that crowd about a woman's hand.

The concern which he begins to feel for her in this train of thought is, however, aborted by a fresh exchange of polite commonplaces (a more literal playing of the "game of sentiment") in which she "freezes" him:

At Forfeits during snow we played, and I
 Must kiss her. 'Well performed!' I said: then she:
 "'Tis hardly worth the money, you agree?'
 Save her? What for? To act this wedded lie!

Thus baldly stated, the husband's callousness toward his wife's possible suicide seems rather exaggerated, and I find it difficult to believe that Meredith intended the passage to be taken quite literally--that he did not really intend to reflect only an uneasy foreboding in the husband's mind, and an uneasy concern, which the husband only half-consciously rejects in his anger when she cuts him. Certainly there are several passages in the poem, as I have indicated elsewhere, that are clearly not intended to be taken literally. In the present case, however, the treatment seems rather clumsy.

In this stanza, the winter imagery--"during snow" (here referred to in the past tense, but probably in the immediate past)--objectifies once again the winter setting which extends from Stanza XXIII ("Tis Christmas weather") through XXXV, a setting appropriate to the emotional action between the husband and wife throughout this section of the poem, and one which has been subjectively imaged in XXX ("Then we stand wakened, shivering from our dream") and in XXXIV ("With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense").

XXXVI

My Lady unto Madam makes her bow.
 The charm of women is, that even while
 You're probed by them for tears, you yet may smile,
 Nay, laugh outright, as I have done just now.
 The interview was gracious: they anoint
 (To me aside) each other with fine praise:
 Discriminating compliments they raise,
 That hit with wondrous aim on the weak point:
 My Lady's nose of Nature might complain.
 It is not fashioned aptly to express
 Her character of large-browed steadfastness.
 But Madam says: Thereof she may be vain!
 Now, Madam's faulty feature is a glazed
 And inaccessible eye, that has soft fires,
 Wide gates, at love-time, only. This admires
 My Lady. At the two I stand amazed.

Although the sterile round of social triviality continues in XXXVI, it is perhaps possible to detect a slight thaw in the husband's emotions in this stanza. While his basic cast of mind is still sardonic, his witty reconstruction of the action in this passage is less freezing and purely destructive than in XXXIV, and the quality of his amusement is more genuine and therapeutic:

The charm of women is, that even while
You're probed by them for tears, you yet may smile,
Nay, laugh outright, as I have done just now.

The occasion of his amusement is the meeting of his wife and My Lady--probably, as indicated by the next stanza, at a fairly large gathering of weekend or vacationing guests at a country estate. "The interview was gracious," and he marvels at how (to him aside) each is able to compliment the other on precisely the other's weak feature, in the case of the Lady, an apparently small nose, and in the case of the wife, "a glazed/ And inaccessible eye," which has "soft fires,/ Wide gates, at love-time, only"--the latter observation, a vivid and intimate bit of description which the husband himself adds and which tends to reverberate a sense of the wife's submerged sexual vitality--and hence, a sense of his loss--beyond the ostensible requirements of the present situation (cf., other references to the wife's eyes in II and III).

At this revelation of female diplomacy, the husband "stand[s] amazed."

XXXVII

Along the garden terrace, under which
A purple valley (lighted at its edge
By smoky torch-flame on the long cloud-ledge
Whereunder dropped the chariot) glimmers rich,
A quiet company we pace and wait,

The dinner-bell in prae-digestive [sic] calm.
 So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm
 Breathes round, we care not if the bell be late:
 Though here and there grey seniors question Time
 In irritable coughings. With slow foot
 The low rosed moon, the face of Music mute,
 Begins among her silent bars to climb.
 As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread,
 I hear the laugh of Madam, and discern
 My Lady's heel before me at each turn.
 Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?

In the analysis of the preceding stanza I suggested that a slight "thaw" in the husband's emotions might be detected; the setting of the present stanza indicates that a "thaw" in the season has quite literally occurred--the season is now manifestly springtime, as opposed to the winter season which has been imaged in XXIII through XXXV, and once again, as in XI, "the grace/ Of heaven seems holding earth in its embrace."

The imagery of the present stanza—which has received almost no attention in previous commentaries—is especially rich in its connotations, and needs to be examined in some detail. It is of course readily apparent that the return of springtime and the natural beauty of the evening have reawakened the husband's sensibilities, as he paces in the company of friends along the garden terrace and waits the dinner-bell in the "prae-digestive [sic] calm" of the late twilight. So revivifying to the senses is the warm "Southern" breeze and the scent of the 'violets' which it wafts up the purple banks of the valley, that for the moment he is content to live totally in the present, cut free from the pain of the past and demanding nothing from the future—"Though here and there grey seniors question Time/ In irritable coughings" (an image which indirectly reflects the husband's own difficulty with Time, or change, at other moments).

The unexpected reawakening of all his senses gives him a curious feeling of unreality, and the natural mystery of the twilight, together with the rising of the moon, induces in him a trance-like state of near-fantasy in which his own pacing and that of the company seem fused with the movement of the moon, as "with slow foot" it begins its climb through "silent bars" of clouds--the clouds here imaged as the staff of the moon's 'mute Music.' In this state of dream-like suspension--"As in and out, in silvery dusk, we thread"--he hears the "laugh of Madam" and discerns his "Lady's heel" before him at each turn, and thus is reminded of his marital quandary, which now itself seems half unreal--"Our tragedy, is it alive or dead?" (The at least partially cathartic effect of this evening on the husband's emotions may perhaps be evident if we consider that in recent stanzas what should have been tragic experience had degenerated into a kind of frozen and bitter comedy.)

As I have suggested previously, the revivifying of the husband's senses and the reawakening of his awareness of natural beauty in this stanza are more or less readily apparent, but in the dream-like calm which the stanza evokes, the resurgence of his sexual desire is perhaps a good bit more subtly imaged--especially if we consider that Meredith was writing in the pre-Freudian period. Although no one has called attention to the fact, it is of course rather comical to consider what a Freudian dream-analysis could do with the imagery of the stanza--the garden terrace, the purple valley, the torch-flame, the cloud-ledge, the chariot dropping under, the quiet pacing movement, the movement up violet banks, the breathing, the slow foot, the low rosed (rising) moon, the climbing among silent bars, and finally, the threading in and out in silvery dusk--all might have sexual connotations for the analyst.

It is not necessary, however, to go anachronistically to Freudian psychology for a somewhat similar reading of the stanza; there is considerable evidence that many of these images had a specifically sexual significance for Meredith himself. Thus, the province of Aphrodite, "the Persuader" (one of Meredith's major symbols for sexual passion in his later poetry), is repeatedly imaged as a "garden" in With the Persuader (e.g., pp. 536, 537, and 538), and also as a "vale" in The Test of Manhood (p. 540), the latter poem being a sequel to With the Persuader. In addition, the description of Aphrodite which opens With the Persuader seems to invoke the same mood of twilight, silent breathing, slow movement, and mute music which characterizes Stanza XXXVII:

Like twilight's pledge of blessed night to come
Or day most golden? All unseen and dumb,
She breathes, she moves, inviting flees,
Is lost, and leaves a thrilled desire
To clasp and strike a slackened lyre.
(pp. 531-532)

And later in the same poem, frustrated desire is specifically imaged as "like torch-smoke after flame;/ The phantom any breeze blows out of form" (p. 533).

It may seem curious to note here that the Aphrodite imagery of XXXVII fuses into Artemis imagery (i.e., the silvery moon), the latter being Meredith's symbol for idealistic purity, but actually it is typical of the sentimentalist in his illusive dream-state--as we shall see further in the next two stanzas--that he frequently confuses the two.

One other question of some import in this stanza is the question of the source of the husband's sexual passion, whether it is here aroused by his Lady or by his wife or by both. Without trying to limit the source of stimulation to his wife alone, I think it is worth noting that a key

part of the sensory imagery—"So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm/
Breathes round"—does seem to relate directly to the wife, for in XXXIX
 she is described as one of those "Who breathe the violet breath of
 maidenhood," and again in XL as having "breathed the violet breath of
 maidenhood/ Against my kisses once." That he does later become consciously
 concerned that he may be still sexually attracted by her is, I think, made
 evident in the next stanza.

In Stanza XXXVII Meredith again makes some use of words and phrases
 of multiple meaning. Thus, the word violet in line 7 operates both as a
 direct color image, picking up the purple coloration of the 'twilight
 valley' in line 2, and as a flower image, with its flower scent emphasized
 by the word sweet in line 7 and again picked up by the word breathes in
 line 8. And breathes itself is, of course, suggestive both of the move-
ment of the Southern breeze, and of the scent, to human breath, of the
 springtime flowers.

Also, in some ungrammatical and subliminal way, as it seems to me,
 the two elements low and rosed in the phrase "the low rosed moon" in line
 11 not only work separately to indicate that the moon is low in the sky
 and that the moon is rose-colored, but at the same time work together to
 intensify or qualify both meanings (i.e., that the moon is low and newly-
arisen in the sky and that the moon is dimly rose-colored).

Finally, a number of images throughout the whole stanza work together
 to create the kind of secondary fantasy setting which I have suggested in
 my previous commentary, the kind of fantasy setting in which the pacing of
 the company becomes fused with the movement of the moon, and the characters
 themselves seem to 'thread in and out' not only "in the silvery dusk," but
 also, perhaps, 'among the silent bars' of the clouds. So diverse are the

technical elements--metaphorical, literal, denotative, connotative, conceptual, sensory, spatial, and even musical--by which this effect is achieved that I would not attempt to map it exactly, and would hesitate to designate it by any one technical term. Nevertheless, the whole technique is, I feel, somewhat akin to the whole technique of the double setting which I described in some detail in the discussion of Stanza XVI.

XXXVIII

Give to imagination some pure light
 In human form to fix it, or you shame
 The devils with that hideous human game:--
 Imagination urging appetite!
 Thus fallen have earth's greatest Gogmagogs,
 Who dazzle us, whom we can not revere:
 Imagination is the charioteer
 That, in default of better, drives the hogs.
 So, therefore, my dear Lady, let me love!
 My soul is arrowy to the light in you.
 You know me that I never can renew
 The bond that woman broke: what would you have?
 'Tis Love, or Vileness! not a choice between,
 Save petrification! What does Pity here?
 She killed a thing, and now it's dead, 'tis dear.
 Oh, when you counsel me, think what you mean!

The renewed demands of the blood, as subtly expressed in the preceding stanza, bring with them a new desire for an idealization of passion, and he asks his Lady to give to his imagination "some pure light/ In human form to fix it." The game of sentiment--"that hideous human game" which he had played with Madam in XVII and XXXV and with My Lady in XXVII (and now perhaps fears he may be tempted to play again with Madam)--is, as he now realizes, simply "imagination urging appetite." In XXXIII he had discovered that when the mind attempts to control the passions, the passions reciprocally invade the mind, so that men become "half serpent," and if the serpent (or devil) becomes "half human, all is right." To allow the passions free play under the mere pretence of love (the game of sentiment)

would be of course to "shame/ The devils," and it is this conscious falsehood which he now renounces. His objective, however, is still self-deluding: while his renunciation of conscious falsehood and his desire for something more meaningful than mere sensualism are both commendable, he still hopes to evade the struggle within his own nature simply by allying himself with purity in his partner. His conception of love is in fact still a sentimental one, in which Love is seen as a kind of transcendent desire which does not involve the passions. Its "spiritual value," as the sentimentalist conceives it, lies in the "purity" of the desire, whereas true spiritual value, according to Meredith's later poetry, must be a product of the individual's struggle within himself--of his ability to control and channel his passions into meaningful human relationships despite the uncertainty and necessary imperfection attendant on such relationships.

Forsaking his own responsibility, the husband here sees his soul as "arrowy" (an Artemis--or purity--image) to "the light" in My Lady. She must allow him to love, for he cannot "renew/ The bond" that his wife broke. The alternatives, as he sets them up, are between "Love" (the sentimental demands of the heart alone) with My Lady; or "Vileness" (the sensual demands of the blood alone) with Madam; or "petrification" (the ascetic demands of the intellect alone) if he attaches himself to neither. As I have here interpolated them, these are three major forms of Egoism which Meredith condemns in his later poetry, suggesting that the mature individual must hold all three demands in balance. For the husband, however, there is "not a choice between." Certainly he will admit none of the "Pity" for Madam which My Lady apparently counsels here. The wife, as he still conceives of it, is solely guilty of the killing of their love

and only prizes it now that it is dead. His Lady, in short, simply does not understand the situation, or she would not "counsel" pity for, and possible reconciliation with, the wife.

Line 5. Gogmagoga. In the Bible, Gog and Magog are representations of the nations that are to war against the kingdom of God under the leadership of Satan (Revelation 20. 8). Also, as used here, the word may mean simply giants, by derivation from Medieval Latin Goemagot, a legendary English giant. The Modern Love idea of giants, or gods, who have "fallen," and "who dazzle us," but "whom we can not revere" has perhaps a counterpart in Meredith's later work in the Ode to the Comic Spirit, in one passage of which Zeus and the other Olympian gods are shown as degenerating and falling to earth as a result of having expelled Momus, 'the jester,' (a symbol of the Comic Spirit), from their midst (pp. 396-399). Trevelyan, in his "Notes," The Poetical Works, p. 603, indicates that much of this story was probably expanded by Meredith from only a slight mythological source.

XXXIX

She yields: my Lady in her noblest mood
Has yielded: she, my golden-crown'd rosel
The bride of every sense! more sweet than those
Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood.
O visage of still music in the sky!
Soft moon! I feel thy song, my fairest friend!
True harmony within can apprehend
Dumb harmony without. And hark! 'tis nigh!
Belief has struck the note of sound: a gleam
Of living silver shows me where she shook
Her long white fingers down the shadowy brook,
That sings her song, half waking, half in dream.
What two come here to mar this heavenly tune?
A man is one: the woman bears my name,
And honour. Their hands touch! Am I still tame?
God, what a dancing spectre seems the moon!

In XXXIX My Lady yields to his desire, while at the same time momentarily fulfilling his need for an idealization of passion. He sees her, in her "noblest mood," as "more sweet than those/ Who breathe the violet breath of maidenhood." As the next stanza makes clear, "the violet breath of maidenhood" is a reference to the wife, so that what the husband is here saying is that, as "the bride of every sense," My Lady provides him with an integration of all his impulses to equal--or exceed, as he

hyperbolically states it--the integration he had once felt with his wife. The integration is, however, still based on a false reading of his own nature and a false conception of the source of spiritual value, so that what he actually does in this stanza is simply repeat the sentimental errors of his youthful love for his wife (though the illusion is here honestly come by, as opposed to the "game of sentiment" of previous stanzas). Thus he sees the consummation of this love, too, as blessed by heavenly paraphernalia. Again, as in XXXVII, the moon is a "visage of still music" ("face of Music mute"), and now he feels the "harmony within" to apprehend its song. The "living silver" of the moonlight is for him a symbol of the "pure light" (XXXVIII) he believes he has found in My Lady, and as the Artemis moon shakes "her long white fingers down the shadowy brook," the rippling of the water seems to sing her song--"half waking, half in dream." He has, in fact, once again become "the puppet of a dream," forgetting the partial insight of X, that "Love's jealous woods about the sun [moon] are curled" and that the love found by 'looking above' is a "fitful thing" (see In the Woods and comments on pp. 87-89).

In the present case, his "heavenly tune" is abruptly jangled by the appearance of his wife and her friend, who are walking in the woods near his own trysting-place with My Lady. When "their hands touch," he feels the "wild beast" (IX) rage in him again. And in a superb imaginal turn-about, the moon, which had caused the "shadowy brook" to 'lose its form' (cf., XXX, where the light of sentimental Love dilutes the shadow of death) becomes a "dancing spectre"--itself an image of death.

As was the case perhaps in Stanza IX, Meredith in XXXIX seems to have taken several images from one of his early sentimental poems and reworked them into an ironic commentary on such sentimentality, this time

applying the sentimental motifs to the husband's affair with My Lady rather than to his relationship with his wife. In the early poem, entitled Song, "two wedded lovers," from the vantage point of a "radiant bower,/ In which the nightingale with charmed power/ Poured forth enchantment o'er the dark repose," watch "the rising moon." In this poem, the last stanza, especially, seems to parallel the husband's feeling in XXXIX:

Far up the sky with ever purer beam,
 Upon the throne of night the moon was seated,
 And down the valley glens the shades retreated,
 And silver light was on the open stream.
 And thus in me, and thus in me, they sighed,
Aspiring Love has hallowed Passion's tide.

In XXXIX, however, as we have seen, the husband's "enchantment" is ironically shattered by the appearance of the wife with her friend.

XL

I bade my Lady think what she might mean.
 Know I my meaning, I? Can I love one,
 And yet be jealous of another? None
 Commits such folly. Terrible Love, I ween,
 Has might, even dead, half sighing to upheave
 The lightless seas of selfishness amain:
 Seas that in a man's heart have no rain
 To fall and still them. Peace can I achieve,
 By turning to this fountain-source of woe,
 This woman, who's to Love as fire to wood?
 She breathed the violet breath of maidenhood
 Against my kisses once! but I say, No!
 The thing is mocked at! Helplessly afloat,
 I know not what I do, whereto I strive.
 The dread that my old love may be alive
 Has seized my nursing new love by the throat.

In XXXVIII he had bade his Lady "think what she might mean" in counselling a reconciliation with his wife. Now, after seeing his wife and her friend in the woods, he must ask himself whether he knows his own meaning. Can he be in love with My Lady, and yet be jealous of Madam? "None/ Commits such folly," he tries to tell himself, but this is precisely the

kind of "veering fit" of which he had found the wife guilty in XIV, and he must admit it of himself now. "Terrible Love" (i.e., the jealous and egoistical side of sentimental love), as he now sees, "has might, even [though its idealism] is dead, half sighing to upheave/ The lightless seas of selfishness amain." The ocean-wave imagery, I have of course identified as representative of the passions throughout the poem (see pp. 53-55), but the particular combination of images here requires special attention. The larger image combination of the upheaving of lightless seas has, in fact, imaginal counterparts in several succeeding stanzas--in the "thoughts black as death," which "like a stirred pool in sunshine break" in XLII; in the "skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave" and the "ponderous breakers" which "plunge and strike" in XLIII; and in the "dark . . . midnight ocean's force,/ Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse" in L. As these succeeding stanzas make clear, the "lightless" and 'upheaving' seas are the blind and unbridled passions of man's nature (and hence the most 'selfish' passions), the Blood uncontrolled by Brain and Spirit. In this stanza, the husband conceives of these seas as having "no rain/ To fall and still them."¹⁰² Although the rain image here is less easy to interpret definitively, it does seem to suggest some form of heavenly influence,¹⁰³

¹⁰²Exactly what counterpart this image of 'rain falling and stilling seas' has in nature, I have been unable to determine. Meredith is perhaps thinking here of wind squalls followed by rain, in which case the then subsiding wind might create the impression of the rain stilling the water.

¹⁰³The Promise in Disturbance, the thematic sonnet which Meredith attached to Modern Love in the 1892 reprint, seems also to reflect--though in a somewhat negative way--this idea of rain as a heavenly influence:

known is the pain
Of music, that nigh throning wisdom went,
And one false note cast wailful to the insane.
Now seems the language heard of Love as rain
To make a mire where fruitfulness was meant.

(p. 133)

perhaps the kind of sentimental spiritual beneficence for love in which the husband can no longer believe. In addition, the rain image might suggest the calming influence (tears) of pity--a mature activity of the Spirit which the husband at this point still rejects.

Forced to recognize the upheaval of his passion for Madam, he must ask himself whether he can expect to achieve "peace" by turning to her now. Once a "fountain-source" of love and joy,¹⁰⁴ she had become a "fountain-source of woe," consuming Love "as fire to wood"--an image which reflects both the heat of his passion for her and the destructive character of her love itself, as he now conceives of it. Although she had "breathed the violet breath of maidenhood/ Against [his] kisses once"--thus (as we may conjecture by remembering the similar usage in XXXIX) appealing to "every sense" and affording him the integration of Love--the thing is now "mocked at"; their love is "helplessly afloat"--a repetition of the shipwreck motif of earlier stanzas, itself a corollary of the wave motif.

Thus he is stymied at every turn: unable to justify, or see any hope for peace in, his desire for his wife, he must yet recognize that the mere continued existence of such feeling for her belies any sanctity in his supposed "new love" for My Lady. The episode with My Lady has, in fact, solved nothing--except that the shock of the scene in the woods has brought him, perhaps, closer to a true reading of his own nature.

XLI

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
When others pick it up becomes a gem!
We grasp at all the wealth it is to them;

¹⁰⁴Cf., "to woo/ Love's Fountain we must mount the ruddy hue," With the Persuader, p. 537.

And by reflected light its worth is found.
 Yet for us still 'tis nothing! and that zeal
 Of false appreciation quickly fades.
 This truth is little known to human shades,
 How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel!
 They waste the soul with spurious desire,
 That is not the ripe flame upon the bough.
 We two have taken up a lifeless vow
 To rob a living passion: dust for fire!
 Madam is grave, and eyes the clock that tells
 Approaching midnight. We have struck despair
 Into two hearts. O, look we like a pair
 Who for fresh nuptials joyfully yield all else?

His mood of intense introspection continues. He and Madam had each cast the other aside as worthless, and now simply because each is desired by another person, each is suddenly valuable again. Here, as Friedman notes ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 365), the "reflected light" motif is repeated from Stanza XXVIII [and III], though in somewhat modified form. Not only does one tend to judge one's own value by the light reflected back from others on oneself, but one even tends to judge the value of others by the light reflected by still a third party. Such a "zeal/ Of false appreciation quickly fades," however, and one finds the object thus glorified still worthless to oneself. Yet as the husband observes---in a comment which seems to sum up the whole plight of the other-directed neurotic personality---"this truth is little known to human shades [to personalities who lack the inner light to understand their own motivations],/ How rare from their own instinct 'tis to feel"---how rare, that is, to be guided by truly spontaneous feelings unaroused by jealousy or spite (cf., Friedman, Ibid., p. 366). Such people, as the husband continues, waste their vitality in "spurious desire," which is not "the ripe flame upon the bough"---which is not productive of the growth of the personality. (The vital connotation of the "ripe flame upon the bough" image, as used here, seems to shift rather inexplicably---if not contradictorily---from the

destructive connotation of the "fire to wood" image, as used in the previous stanza.)

Mutually spurred by jealousy and selfishness, the husband and wife have decided to take up a "lifeless vow"--have decided to renew their marital relationship--thus robbing the "living passion," the at least somewhat more spontaneous feeling, each has recently felt toward the other lady and the other man.

The hour is late, and the wife, with apprehension under her 'gravity,' "eyes the clock which tells" the approach of the hour of retiring (both grave and midnight, here, perhaps echo the midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow motif;¹⁰⁵ and eyes the clock echoes of course the time-torpor motif). By their decision to reunite, they have "stuck despair/ Into two hearts"--that is, perhaps, into the hearts of My Lady and the other man--and they themselves look scarcely "like a pair/ Who for fresh nuptials joyfully yield all else."

On first thought it might seem as though Meredith makes a mistake in point of view in this stanza in allowing the husband to accurately dissect his motivations for a reconciliation with his wife and forecast, as it were, its failure in the very process of enacting that reconciliation; but in a poem of such intricately controlled point of view as Modern Love proves to be elsewhere, the point of view here is worth more careful consideration. It is, of course, a modern psychoanalytical truism that an intellectual insight into motivation does not necessarily (and especially not immediately) free one from that motivation. Thus there is no reason

¹⁰⁵Friedman, "The Jangled Harp," p. 23, identifies the midnight image here, but not the pun echo of grave.

to suppose that the husband could not have had the conscious insight here attributed to him and still have acted out the reconciliation, and it is, indeed, precisely this intellectual insight--this freedom from his usual sentimental illusions--prior to the renewal of their marital relationship which will allow him fully to recognize and accept his instinctual drives and emotional reactions for what they are when the actual experience of the reunion has called them forth.

We might also note, here, the difference between his present mood and his mood prior to the scene in the woods. His mood in this and in the immediately preceding stanza is unillusioned and rather hopeless, but it is no longer sardonic or egoistically (that is, self-justifyingly) cynical. He is self-questioning and shares, along with the wife, the responsibility for the present uncertainty and apparent folly of their situation.¹⁰⁶

XLIII

I am to follow her. There is much grace
In women when thus bent on martyrdom.
They think that dignity of soul may come,
Perchance, with dignity of body. Base!
But I was taken by that air of cold
And statuesque sedateness, when she said
'I'm going'; lit a taper, bowed her head,
And went, as with the stride of Pallas bold.
Fleshly indifference horrible! The hands
Of Time now signal: O, she's safe from me!
Within those secret walls what do I see?
Where first she set the taper down she stands:
Not Pallas: Hebe shamed! Thoughts black as death
Like a stirred pool in sunshine break. Her wrists
I catch: she faltering, as she half-resists,
'You love...? love...? love...?' all on an indrawn
breath.

¹⁰⁶Both Trevelyan, "Notes," The Poetical Works, p. 583, and Richard F. Messenger, "The Poetry of George Meredith," (unpubl. doctoral diss., Yale, 1949), pp. 188-189, note some change in the husband's attitude in these two stanzas.

Having agreed to resume marital relations--to take up their "lifeless vow" (XLI)--the wife goes now to her chamber, indicating that he is to follow. She goes, however, not with warmth or anticipation, but with an air of "martyrdom," and he muses ironically on her belief that spiritual worth--"dignity of soul"--may come as a concomitant of physical denial--"dignity of body." Yet such a belief and such "grace" strike a chord in his own frustrated idealism (in XXIV, we may recall, he had adored the "cruel, lovely pallor [the sexual repression] which surrounds/ Her footsteps"), and for the moment he is "taken" by her "air of cold/ And statuesque sedateness" as she goes "with stride of Pallas bold." He is now, however, much nearer to being free from sentimental illusions, and, in the next moment, her "fleshly indifference" strikes him as "horrible," an indication of the meaninglessness of their reunion (cf. Friedman, "The Fire of Renewal," p. 366). "The hands/ Of Time"--which for sentimentalists, unable to accept change, have so long stood still--"now signal" their return to the past relationship, but the husband now resolves not to go through with it: "O, she's safe from me!" He has, however, followed her "within those secret walls"--into her bedchamber from which he has been excluded--and sees in the light of the candle "not Pallas," but "Hebe shamed!" The cold and sexless pride of the virgin goddess (Athena) has disappeared, and the wife stands now embarrassed by her own sexual feeling (Hebe was the mortal girl who became cupbearer to the gods and then later became the wife of Hercules, and Meredith here apparently attributes to her an aura of shame in leaving her position among the gods to assume the duties of a mortal wife).

With the shattering of the wife's "fleshly indifference," the husband again has a reversal of feeling, and his own repressed passion surges

back--"Thoughts black as death/ Like a stirred pool in sunshine break."
 He seizes her wrists, and she yields, half-resisting, as she plaintively demands of him whether he loves her. No reply is recorded, and we may suppose, from the context of the succeeding stanza, that he simply gives way to his passion, making no attempt to answer her.

XLIII

Mark where the pressing wind shoots javelin-like
 Its skeleton shadow on the broad-backed wave!
 Here is a fitting spot to dig Love's grave;
 Here where the ponderous breakers plunge and strike,
 And dart their hissing tongues high up the sand:
 In hearing of the ocean, and in sight
 Of those ribbed wind-streaks running into white.
 If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
 I never could have made it half so sure,
 As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
 The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!
 'Tis morning: but no morning can restore
 What we have forfeited. I see no sin:
 The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
 No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
 We are betrayed by what is false within.

The renewal of sexual relations between husband and wife, indicated in Stanza XLII, marks the climax in their struggle toward reconciliation, a climax which is actually the coup de grâce in the death struggle of their love. And Stanza XLIII (in a brilliant metaphorical display) figuratively and emotionally records that climax, as well as commenting on it. As Jack Lindsay has suggested,¹⁰⁷ we may, indeed, find in the morning wrestle of wind and waves (lines 1-7) a kind of reenactment of the actual love-making of the night before, though to see only the gross physical symbolism of these images (the phallic symbolism of the javelin, the personifications of broad-back and ribs, and the sensual tension of pressing,

¹⁰⁷George Meredith, His Life and Work, p. 356.

digging, plunging, and darting) would be of course to belittle and debase the poetic achievement of the stanza. As it is, however, these elements are transmuted by a wider and more plastic symbolism so that what is finally reenacted is the emotion and moral significance of the action, not simply the action itself. Like most of the key stanzas of Modern Love (e.g., Stanzas I, XLVII, and L), Stanza XLIII seems, in fact, to sum up many of the major symbolic motifs of the poem. Unbridled passion ("wave," "ponderous breakers plunge," "ocean"—ocean-wave cluster); violent aggression ("shoots javelin-like," "strike," "dart"—murder-knife-wound-blood cluster); fraudulent betrayal ("hissing tongues"—serpent-venom-poison cluster); and the shadow of death ("skeleton shadow," "grave," "ribbed wind-streaks running into white"—midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow cluster)—all are universalized and given force and dignity in this elemental strife of wind and water. Also, later in the stanza, the "spin" image may suggest the snare-bat-cage-pit-beast cluster.

Walking on the seashore in the cold light of morning (the hour, supposedly, of rebirth—but here "no morning can restore" what they have lost), the husband recognizes that, more than anything else could do, their renewal of marital relations without coming to terms with their responsibility to one another (their "unblest kisses") has dealt the final blow to their love. But because he had entered into this relationship without the usual paraphernalia of sentimental ideas to clothe in a dream state (see XXXIX) his sexual desire, he is now able, with "full-waked sense," to recognize his sensualism and totally selfish motivation of the night before for what it was. And with this self-knowledge he is able to see the whole disintegration of their love in a new perspective, a perspective in which he sees "no sin." No longer must he project onto the wife

the willful murder and witch-like betrayal of their love or evasively plague himself with questions of "what's my crime?" (X). "The wrong," as he now sees, "is mixed." Each must share in the responsibility, but neither has acted through deliberate malice: in the tragedy of real life, "No villain need be! Passions [the unguided demands of the blood] spin the plot," and each is betrayed by his lack of knowledge of his own nature—by the falsity of his conception of what is "within."

XLIV

They say, that Pity in Love's service dwells,
 A porter at the rosy temple's gate.
 I missed him going: but it is my fate
 To come upon him now beside his wells;
 Whereby I know that I Love's temple leave,
 And that the purple doors have closed behind.
 Poor soul! if, in those early days unkind,
 Thy power to sting had been but power to grieve,
 We now might with an equal spirit meet,
 And not be matched like innocence and vice.
 She for the Temple's worship has paid price,
 And takes the coin of Pity as a cheat.
 She sees through simulation to the bone:
 What's best in her impels her to the worst:
 Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,
 Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone!

Having accepted sex without love and thereby having recognized and admitted the weakness of his own nature, the husband is at last able to pity his wife in her frailty (cf., Friedman, "The Jangled Harp," p. 11). But "Pity," as he knows, is only a "porter" in Love's service, not love itself--and especially not the kind of sentimental love based on an idealization of the partner in which he had believed. Pity--which includes the understanding of human limitations and the sharing of human suffering--had been absent from his relationship with his wife in the beginning, and its very presence now is an indication that his old idealization of her, and thus his old Sentimental Love for her, is gone.

If, as he thinks, "in those early days unkind" (in those days when their idealizations of one another had first begun to show cracks), her "power to sting had been but power to grieve"--if there had been more occasions, such as in VIII, when he was able to get beyond himself and share her suffering along with his own, rather than simply to suffer in his own wounded ego--they might now "with an equal spirit meet." If he had been able to pity her earlier, she too might by now have learned the lesson of pity (of tolerance for frailty) and not be still forced to think in the black and white terms of "innocence and vice." But she has suffered silently and alone, seeing as her only hope a return of his idealization of her; and in allowing him to make love to her (as indicated in XLII) while plaintively demanding of him whether that idealization had returned ("You love . . . ? love . . . ? love . . . ?"), "she for the Temple's worship has paid price," and "takes the coin of Pity as a cheat." She sees through any "simulation" he might make of the old Love, and "what's best in her" (her demand for an ideal Love) "impels her to the worst" (impels her to reject their one hope for a renewal of love on a sounder basis). "Never, she cries, shall Pity soothe Love's thirst,/ Or foul hypocrisy for truth atone!" She is, in fact, still caught in the same misconception of love and of the real source of spiritual worth which the husband had expressed so strongly in XXXVIII when he rejected the counsels of Pity.

XLV

It is the season of the sweet wild rose,
 My Lady's emblem in the heart of me!
 So golden-crown'd shines she gloriously,
 And with that softest dream of blood she glows:
 Mild as an evening heaven round Hesper bright!

I pluck the flower, and smell it, and revive
 The time when in her eyes I stood alive.
 I seem to look upon it out of Night.
 Here's Madam, stepping hastily. Her whims
 Bid her demand the flower, which I let drop.
 As I proceed, I feel her sharply stop,
 And crush it under heel with trembling limbs.
 She joins me in a cat-like way, and talks
 Of company, and even condescends
 To utter laughing scandal of old friends.
 These are the summer days, and these our walks.

Their attempt to resume a normal relationship having failed, they continue their ironic domestic détente into the summer months—"the season of the sweet wild rose." The husband's affair with the golden-haired Lady is now in the past, but walking in the evening, he plucks a rose ("My Lady's emblem") and recalls the brief joy he had shared with her. In these first eight lines of Stanza XLV, the husband repeats almost the whole array of his sentimental Love machinery: the flower image ("the sweet wild rose"); the sun image ("so golden-crown'd shines she gloriously"); the star image ("Hesper"—the evening star); and the conception of living in the light from the loved one's eyes, while all else is left dark ("I seem to look upon it out of Night")--all reappear.¹⁰⁸ But an extremely

¹⁰⁸As I have suggested previously (see pp. 132-133), the sentimental images and conceits which the husband applies to his affair with My Lady not only parallel those which he had applied to his original love relationship with his wife, but also frequently echo the images and conceits in Meredith's youthful poems, those published in the 1851 edition. In the present case, the first two lines of each of the three stanzas of the early poem Song provide close parallels to at least three of the four images or conceits just cited, and the fourth conceit (that of living in the light of the loved one's eyes) is, I think, implied:

Love within the lover's breast
Burns like Hesper in the west,

Lovel thy love pours down on mine
 As the sunlight on the vine,

important distinction should be made here, for the husband now recognizes all of this idealization, this heavenly and paradisaical machinery, as "that softest dream of blood"--that is, as having its source in the senses, in instinctive passion--and thus, by logical extension, as being not pure and spiritual in itself, but only of final moral worth as it is brought under the rule of intelligence and given continuity by responsible conduct within the love situation, a situation not to be exempt from the imperfections and mutabilities of life itself. He is, in fact, no longer a sentimentalist: while he may regret the loss of romantic emotion,¹⁰⁹ he now sees such emotion in its proper perspective.

When Madam appears, "stepping hastily," and, with intuitive jealousy, demands the flower, he lets it drop, thus confirming her intuition. As he walks on, he feels her "sharply stop,/ And crush it under heel with trembling limbs"--an image combination which echoes the husband's own jealousy of the other man in Stanza III: "If he comes beneath a heel,/ He

As a dewdrop on the rose
 In thy heart my passion glows,

 (pp. 6-7)

¹⁰⁹It should be understood that Meredith never decries the ability to feel romantic emotion in itself--such ability is, for him, one of the happiest gifts of nature--but he only decries the mistaking of romantic emotion for a moral sanction and a reliable guide to conduct in itself--these latter being functions of the whole personality, of Blood, Brain, and Spirit in combination. Thus, as he writes in The Woods of Westernmain, "Change," the necessary ingredient for spiritual growth, "must wed the thought and felt":

Change is on the wing to bud
Rose in brain from rose in blood.
Wisdom throbbing shall you see
Central in complexity.
 (p. 198)

shall be crushed until he cannot feel." Rejoining him "in a cat-like way," she pretends to be gay and commonplace, "and even condescends/ To utter laughing scandal of old friends"---among which scandal she perhaps includes slights at the golden-haired Lady herself; in any event her "laughing scandal" certainly reflects ironically on their own situation.

Previously, as Messenger suggests, the wife's jealous display would have evoked some bitter comment from the husband, but his mood has melted and chastened since his insight during the morning walk on the sea-shore (XLIII). His only comment now--as Messenger states it, p. 195--"is a deceptively simple line, masking regret and sadness, 'These are the summer days, and these our walks.'"

XLVI

At last we parley: we so strangely dumb
In such a close communion! It befell
About the sounding of the Matin-bell,
And lo! her place was vacant, and the hum
Of loneliness was round me. Then I rose,
And my disordered brain did guide my foot
To that old wood where our first love-salute
Was interchanged: the source of many throes!
There did I see her, not alone. I moved
Toward her, and made proffer of my arm.
She took it simply, with no rude alarm;
And that disturbing shadow passed reproved.
I felt the pained speech coming, and declared
My firm belief in her, ere she could speak.
A ghastly morning came into her cheek,
While with a widening soul on me she stared.

At last these two--who have for so long been "strangely dumb" as to their deeper feeling--are brought into meaningful communication by an accidental meeting. The incident occurs in the morning hours when the husband noting the wife's absence from the house and feeling himself alone

with Time ("the hum/ Of loneliness was round me")¹¹⁰ rises and wanders forth himself. His "disordered" memories and emotions guide him, perhaps half-unconsciously, to the wood which had been the scene of their courtship, and thus "the source of many throes" he had experienced since. There he finds her with the other man, and moving courteously toward her offers his arm. She takes it with simple dignity, and the other man moves quietly away, taking with him (apparently permanently) the "disturbing shadow" which he has cast over their relationship. When he has gone, the husband feels the wife on the verge of painful confession and, before she can speak, declares his "firm belief in her." As I have suggested several times previously, the final question of the wife's infidelity with the other man is left, I think, intentionally ambiguous throughout the poem. Quite possibly, in such a situation, the husband might not know the answer to such a question. More important, however, is a subtle moral point which Meredith is perhaps able to make by leaving the question ambiguous. And that is that, as a mature individual, the husband need not know, and that, perhaps, as a mature individual he must be able to live with both answers--that is, he must be able to accept, as a possibility, his wife's momentary infidelity, this being a function of human frailty which he also shares, and at the same time he must be able to accept with "firm belief" her main intention toward him--which is certainly to be reconciled to him and to be faithful to him. This, he is now able to do; but the wife, less able to accept the complexity of life, sees, in his affirmation itself, an index to his previous suspicions, and, blanching in the morning light, stares on him "with a widening soul"--that is, with frightened eyes (an

¹¹⁰Cf., Friedman, "The Jangled Harp," p. 15.

extension of the conventional image of the eyes as the windows of the soul). The images here of the "ghastly morning" and the "widening soul" indicate, however, not only fright, but also at least some quality of reawakening and growth, an opening out of emotion, and thus they help to prepare us for the expansion of spirit which both husband and wife will experience in the succeeding stanza.

Technically, it is important also not to overlook in this stanza the sense of resolution and finality which is given to this meeting between husband and wife by the subtle shift from present to past tense which Meredith effects in line 2. The solemn dignity and gravity of the meeting is further enhanced by the religious images of "communion" and "Matin-bell," by the Biblical ring of "It befell" and "lo!" and by the archaic tone of the verb forms "did guide" and "did . . . see"—elements which tend to disguise but also reinforce the shift to the past tense.

XLVII

We saw the swallows gathering in the sky,
And in the osier-isle we heard them noise.
We had not to look back on summer joys,
Or forward to a summer of bright dye:
But in the largeness of the evening earth
Our spirits grew as we went side by side.
The hour became her husband and my bride.
Love, that had robbed us so, thus blessed our dearth!
The pilgrims of the year waxed very loud
In multitudinous chatterings, as the flood
Full brown came from the West, and like pale blood
Expanded to the upper crimson cloud.
Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave,
Where I have seen across the twilight wave
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

Ever since Swinburne singled it out for special regard in his "Letter to the Editor," The Spectator, June 7, 1862, pp. 632-633, Stanza XLVII has been the most highly praised (and most frequently quoted and anthologized)

stanza in Modern Love. Surprisingly, however, it has received almost no specific interpretation and analysis--Friedman, for example, devotes only about ten lines to the entire stanza. The omission is serious, for Stanza XLVII not only summarizes many of the major image motifs of the poem, but also resolves, most significantly, the key philosophical conflict of the whole work, the conflict between life and death, and reasserts the husband's faith in the future--that faith which had seemed to be destroyed in XI and XII.

The use of the past tense and of quasi-Biblical and religious imagery and diction to create a feeling of finality and solemnity in XLVI is continued in XLVII, but here the word choice is more subtle and the imagery more all-pervasive--"spirits," "blessed," "pilgrims," "multitudinous," "flood," "blood," "immortal," "mercifully," and "wings" all contributing to the quasi-religious effect. Moreover, the sense of finality and solemnity is greatly enhanced in XLVII by the time of day--late evening--and by the expansion and orchestration of the earth and sky at this time of day.

After their gracious meeting in the woods in the morning hours, the husband and wife have, perhaps, had a day of truce, not yet fully discussing their situation but politely and generously feeling around the edges of a reconciliation. Now, walking in the evening twilight and watching the swallows gather in the sky and nest in the willow isle, they give themselves over to the beauty of the present hour, demanding neither a return to the "joys" of the past, nor any pledge of ideal certainty from the future. Thus, "in the largeness of the evening earth" their spirits grow as they go "side by side," and the hour becomes "her husband and [his] bride." This "largeness of the evening earth," we should note, is both a

natural phenomenon--in the sense of various optical appearances of enlargement, i.e., the lengthening of shadows and the enlargement of the sun as seen slantwise through the evening atmosphere--and a psychological and spiritual phenomenon. And again Meredith makes highly skillful technical use of imagery and diction to heighten the poetic effect he is creating. Thus, "sky," "earth," "cloud," and "wave" are all all-encompassing and/or expansive images and the effectiveness of each is enhanced by its end-rhyme position. And "noise," "largeness," "grew," "waxed," "loud," "multitudinous," "flood," "full," "expanded," "upper," "across," "sail," and "wings" further add to the effect of expansion--"noise," "loud," "flood," and "wings" also appearing in end-rhyme position.

Another subtle, but important thematic element in the stanza is the "orchestration" of the evening which I mentioned above. It will be remembered that in VIII the "music" of the "two reed-pipes" had been "coarsely stopped." Now the "multitudinous chatterings" of the swallows, as they come, like a "flood/ Full brown . . . from the West," reestablishes that music. "Love, that had robbed [them] so, thus [blesses their] dearth!"

The paradox implicit in the second part of this stanza can be best understood in terms of the two kinds of love which Meredith describes in The Woods of Westermain. There we find, on the one hand, a "Love" which "volcano"-like "flings/ Fires of lower Earth to sky," a "Love" which "sings/ Sovereignly of ME and I" (p. 197); and it is this type of love--which demands ideal certainty for personal passion--that has "robbed" the couple. It is this type of love whose music may be "coarsely stopped," as The Woods of Westermain further indicates:

. . . But bring you a note
 Wrangling, howsoe'er remote,
 Discords out of discord spin
 Round and round derisive din.
 (p. 197)

But The Woods of Westermain also offers the possibility of another kind of love:

Drink the sense the notes infuse,
 You a larger self will find:
 Sweetest fellowship ensues
 With the creatures of your kind.
 Ay, and Love, if Love it be
 Flaming over I and ME,
 Love meet they who do not shove
 Cravings in the van of Love.
 (p. 196)

Having put aside cravings (the egoistic demand for past gratifications or future certainties, the husband especially, in their evening walk, does realize a larger self ("our spirits grew as we went side by side"), and thus also realizes the second kind of love, in which "the hour [becomes] her husband and [his] bride," and the uncertain notes of their personal love infuse in the "multitudinous chatterings" of the swallows.

And thus also, even though the first kind of love had "robbed [them] of immortal things" (had made him see, in the "amber cradle near the sun's decline," only a "dead infant," in XI), the second kind of love now "mercifully" gives him a "little moment" of insight, in which he sees "across the twilight wave" (across the boundary of death) "the swan" (which is the lovely bird of death) "sail with her young" (with life reborn) "beneath her wings." Thus the paradox completes itself: through "sweetest fellowship" with "creatures of [his] kind" (with his wife and with the swallows and the young swans), the husband is promised by a

larger love some share in those "immortal things" which his sentimental love had "robbed" him of.¹¹¹

Although the consolation here is intuitive and objectively tenuous, it is not the "sallow" consolation of "Philosophy" ("cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent") which he had found unsatisfactory in IV--it is, as the imagery of Stanza XLVII makes clear, the product equally of Blood, Brain, and Spirit. Though the passions are no longer a "volcano," flinging "fires of lower Earth to sky," and thus (sun-like) blinding him to the fact of death, yet the "flood" of instinctual feeling, chastened by the Brain and Spirit, does remain, and "like pale blood" expands "to the upper crimson cloud." Freed from his Egoism, with Blood, Brain, and Spirit in harmony, the husband is able once more to believe in the future--in the "fair life which in the distance lies/ For all men, beckoning out from dim rich skies" (XII).

As I have suggested, Stanza XLVII (which I consider the philosophical climax of the poem) sums up, like Stanza XLIII (the dramatic climax), a number of the major image motifs of the poem, but in Stanza XLVII these

¹¹¹I am indebted to Norman Kelvin, p. 34, for first calling to my attention the conception of the "swan" as the bird of death. Kelvin himself, however, does nothing with the philosophical significance of the image. Meredith uses the swan image, in fact, in a somewhat similar context of spiritual enlargement and of death and rebirth in The Day of the Daughter of Hades:

The island was hers, and the deep,
 All heaven, a golden hour.
 Then with wonderful voice that rang
 Through air as the swan's nigh death,
 Of the glory of Light she sang,
 She sang of the rapture of Breath.

 She sang of the furrow and seed,
 The burial, [and] birth of the grain.
 (p. 214)

motifs appear in subtly varied and frequently chastened forms. Thus the Time motif, generally representative of the couple's inability to make productive use of Time, appears here as the "hour" which 'becomes her husband and his bride,' thus indicating that for the moment, they have ceased to fear Time and are able to accept change and growth. Similarly the sun-wing motif of romantic love appears here, but the sun is now a tinge on "the upper crimson cloud," rather than "blinding aglow," and the wings are no longer those of the earth-spurning, sun-striving "eagle," but those of the "swan," itself a familiar of death, and thereby of earthly necessity.

The ocean-wave motif, representative of the passions, also appears, imaged here by "flood," by "wave," and perhaps more directly by "blood"; but the passions are now controlled and infused by Brain and Spirit, rather than 'blindly ramping.' And even the midnight-tomb-ghost-skeleton-grave-shadow cluster is represented here in chastened form in the "twilight" image and the "swan" symbol of death--but the fact of death, while recognizable here, is no longer frightening. Finally, the music image, symbolic of the ultimate wisdom and harmony achieved by the husband, is here represented, as indicated above, by the "multitudinous chattering" of the swallows.

As significant as those motifs which are present in Stanza XLVII are perhaps those motifs which are absent--the murder-knife-wound-blood motif; the snare-bat-cage-pit-beast motif; and the snake-venom-poison motif. Freed of the various negative forms of his Egoism--his cynicism, his sensualism, and his morbid asceticism--the husband must no longer project onto his wife and onto the external world his fear of change and his frustration. Loss and grief he may still feel, but not hopelessness and lack

of vitality. "Change, the strongest son of Life," as Meredith says in The Woods of Westermain, p. 199, "Has the Spirit here to wife."

XLVIII

Their sense is with their senses all mixed in,
 Destroyed by subtleties these women are!
 More brain, O Lord, more brain! or we shall mar
 Utterly this fair garden we might win.
 Behold! I looked for peace, and thought it near.
 Our inmost hearts had opened, each to each.
 We drank the pure daylight of honest speech.
 Alas! that was the fatal draught, I fear.
 For when of my lost Lady came the word,
 This woman, O this agony of flesh!
 Jealous devotion bade her break the mesh,
 That I might seek that other like a bird.
 I do adore the nobleness! despise
 The act! She has gone forth, I know not where.
 Will the hard world my sentence of her share?
 I feel the truth; so let the world surmise.

Although the wife had shared in the emotional rejuvenation provided by their evening walk in XLVII, she has not won through to a clear understanding of her own sentimentalism as the husband has. Her "sense is with [her] senses all mixed in": she still confuses "intelligence and instinct" (XXX), mistaking the impulses of passion for the promptings of intelligence and ideal value. And she is still "destroyed by subtleties"--the fatal ability to "see the side-lie of a truth" (XXVI): she is still unable to accept the main intention in human relationships but instead demands an ideal perfection in thought and impulse as well as in action. The husband's anguished plea for "More brain, O Lord, more brain" in line 3 has, as Friedman notes ("The Fire of Renewal," pp. 143 and 369), been frequently quoted out of context as an indication of Meredith's "intellectuality," but as Friedman argues, correctly I think, the intent of the speech is simply to counter the wife's suicidal sentimentality, her mixing of "sense" and "senses." As Friedman states it: "The cardinal sin for

Meredith is . . . that one faculty should usurp the station of another. Brain is wrong when Blood should be functioning, just as Blood is wrong when Brain should be functioning" (Ibid., p. 369).

Able at last to talk openly with his wife, the husband had "looked for peace, and thought it near." But "the pure daylight of honest speech" which they drank proved to be the "fatal draught" (a poison image which again foreshadows the wife's suicide in XLIX). Thus when the husband admits his previous attraction to My Lady, the wife--spurred by her sentimentalism, which as Friedman notes, is really based upon a sublimated sensualism, a demand for an undisturbed continuance of pleasure ("O this agony of flesh!")--quixotically determines to leave him so that he might return to My Lady.¹¹² As I have indicated above, she is unable to accept his main intention toward her (his present sincere desire for a reconciliation), but sees only the "side-life" of the truth--the fact that he had been capable of loving another. Unable to endure this breach in her ideal of Love, she is driven by her "jealous devotion" (her confusion of sense and senses) to "break the mesh" of her passion (see discussion of spin-weave-mesh-web imagery, Stanza XXVI, pp. 122-123), so that he might "seek that other like a bird." Friedman suggests, probably correctly, that "break the mesh" means suicide, "the only way out for tortured passion" ("The Jangled Harp," p. 20). And the bird image indicates that she will hold true to the sentimental ideal of a "winged" love (XXVI), even at the sacrifice of herself.

The husband can see both the "nobleness" of her impulse, her seeking for ideal value, and the foolishness of her action. Though the "hard

¹¹²Cf., "The Fire of Renewal," pp. 369-370.

world" might misread her leaving him, as an indication that she still loves the other man, he is himself now no longer cursed by the fatal ability to see the side-lie of a truth. He is now able to accept her main intention, to "feel the truth," without being misled by subtleties. Now, at last, he does have, as Messenger notes (p. 199), some "charity to give" (cf. XX).

XLIX

He found her by the ocean's moaning verge,
 Nor any wicked change in her discerned;
 And she believed his old love had returned,
 Which was her exultation, and her scourge.
 She took his hand, and walked with him, and seemed
 The wife he sought, though shadow-like and dry.
 She had one terror, lest her heart should sigh,
 And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed.
 She dared not say, 'This is my breast: look in.'
 But there's a strength to help the desperate weak.
 That night he learned how silence best can speak
 The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin.
 About the middle of the night her call
 Was heard, and he came wondering to the bed.
 'Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!' she said.
 Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all.

The first line of Stanza XLIX immediately sets the mood and fore-shadows the tragedy which the stanza will record. In terms of imagery, the effect is achieved through private symbolism, as well as through the direct personification of emotion ("moaning") and through the use of traditional ocean-waves-lapping-shore imagery to connote sorrow (cf., "Dover Beach"). In terms of private symbolism, the ocean-wave imagery is also, as we have seen, Meredith's symbol for passion, so that "the ocean's moaning verge" would further suggest that all passion is spent. This suggestion of the narrative's drawing to its conclusion is also greatly enhanced by the treatment of point of view. The brief shift back to present tense in XLVIII now allows a new shift in perspective into past

tense, and the feeling created by this shift is that what has happened has irrevocably happened, rather than being a function of the still suspenseful present. In addition, the shift to third person narration, here utilized for the first time since Stanza IX, represents a shift from lyric involvement to objective tragic vision: the husband-narrator--who had attempted to view his past objectively at the beginning of the poem but had instead been caught up and forced to relive his experience--has now passed through the conflict of his passion and regained his tragic perspective.

When he finds his wife by the seashore, the husband discerns in her no "wicked change"--an image which might suggest that he is unaware that she has taken (or intends to take) poison, but which may also, I think, be significantly linked, by way of contrast, to his earlier conception of her. Thus he now no longer conceives of her as "guilty," as a kind of angel-comforter wickedly changed to witch-betrayer, as he had egoistically thought of her in Stanzas VII and IX. Instead she seems "the wife he sought," though no longer over-idealized, but "shadow-like" (overcast-star motif) and "dry" (i.e., empty of vitality--cf., the "dust for fire" image, Stanza XLI). She, on her part, believes "his old love" (his sentimental conception of her) has returned, which is her "exultation" (the triumph of her idealization) and at the same time her "scourge"--because one part of her still feels herself guilty. She has "one terror, lest her heart should sigh,/ And tell her loudly she no longer dreamed." As Trevelyan suggests, though not very explicitly, she knows her heart [i.e., the history of her own shifting emotions and attractions] well enough to

know that this sentimental conception of a perfect and unchanging love is an illusion,¹¹³ and thus she dares not say--even to herself--"This is my breast: look in."

"But there's a strength to help the desperate weak": In XXXV, the husband had warned himself to "have a care of natures that are mute!" Now he learns "how silence best can speak/ The awful things when Pity pleads for Sin." In XLIV, she had rejected Pity as a substitute for romantic love, for pity is itself an indication of (as well as sympathy for) human frailty. Now, rather than to accept such an index to her frailty, she prefers to take her life. "About the middle of the night," she calls him to her bedside, and he comes, "wondering" at the strangeness of her manner:

'Now kiss me, dear! it may be, now!' she said.
Lethe had passed those lips, and he knew all.

As Friedman writes: "With tragic irony, her love was to be fulfilled only at the moment of death when she knows there can be no rude intrusions of Time, the dream-killer . . . [she] who could not bear the thought of love dying . . . has killed herself that her love might regain one brief instant of life" ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 371).

This hour of the wife's death--midnight--was foreshadowed in Stanza I, and less explicitly in VI, XXII, and XLI; and the means of her death--by poison--was foreshadowed in I and XXXV. The Lethe image--the river (or ocean) of forgetfulness--also echoes the ocean-shore imagery which initiates this stanza, and recalls as well the ocean-shore setting of XLIII--where the seashore provides "a fitting spot to dig Love's grave."¹¹⁴

¹¹³Cf., "Notes," The Poetical Works, p. 584.

¹¹⁴As Elizabeth C. Wright notes, p. 8, the Lethe image also "gathers up" the poison imagery which runs throughout the poem.

The phrase "and he knew all," which concludes this stanza, is capable of widening circles of meaning: first, that he now knows that she has taken poison; second, that he now knows the extent of her guilt, or "all" that he will know of it (and here I think the expression is again intentionally ambiguous); and finally, that he now knows all that this whole tragic experience can teach him, that he has now achieved the kind of total "recognition" which is the seal of tragic drama.

L

Thus piteously Love closed what he begat:
 The union of this ever-diverse pair!
 These two were rapid falcons in a snare,
 Condemned to do the flitting of the bat.
 Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,
 They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers:
 But they fed not on the advancing hours:
 Their hearts held cravings for the buried day.
 Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
 Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.
 Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
 When hot for certainties in this our life!--
 In tragic hints here see what evermore
 Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
 Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

As a summation and an enlargement of the meaning of the entire poem, Stanza L in almost every line re-evokes major image pictures and thematic motifs from previous stanzas. Thus the first half of the somewhat mixed metaphor in line 1, in which "Love" is seen as piteously closing "what he begat," re-evokes the conceit in XLIV in which Pity, the porter at Love's gate, is discovered "beside his wells," when "the purple doors have closed behind." The immediate source of the piteousness of the ending is of course the wife's suicide in XLIX, but the archaic meaning of piteous (in the sense of having or showing pity) does suggest the husband's active, though ineffectual, pity in XLIV.

The paradox of line 2--"the union of this ever-diverse pair"--then expresses an irony which underlies the whole poem: and it is not simply the irony of two diverse temperaments united in the social institution of marriage, but the more subtle irony of two people who were, for a time, "ideally" united in their romantic conceptions of one another, but who could never, in their romantic pride, communicate their secret selves, their uncertainties and frailties, to one another. "Rapid falcons" (an echo of the eagle motif of XXVI), they had striven ideally for the sun, but struck by the arrow of distrust (see XXVI and discussion, pp. 122-124), each was caught in the "snare" of his own passion (XXVI and discussion), and "condemned to do the flitting of a bat"--that is, each was condemned to the erratic impulses of his instinct, but was blind (bat-like) to the true source of these impulses. As the husband recognizes in XLIII: "Passions spin the plot:/ We are betrayed by what is false within."

The next two lines--"Lovers beneath the singing sky of May,/ They wandered once; clear as the dew on flowers"--recalls the idyllic, young love-springtime imagery of XI, with its "showers of sweet notes from larks on wing . . . dropping like a noon-dew," and its "golden foot of May" upon "the flowers." But as that stanza suggests (and as numerous other stanzas illustrate) they had been unable to cope with change, unable to make productive use of Time--that is, as Stanza L states it, "they fed not on the advancing hours:/ Their hearts held cravings for the buried day."

The imagery here, and indeed the imagery of almost the whole of Stanza L from line 3 through line 16, is expanded on and clarified in a later poem Youth in Memory, which like so much of Meredith's later poetry seems to be a deliberate commentary on the thematic questions evoked--and answered,

more cryptically--in Modern Love. According to Youth in Memory, "by what they crave are they betrayed," whether it be "cravings for an eagle's flight," which brings "only flash of shade" (the falcon-bat motif) or whether it be the egoistic craving for the sensual gratification of the past--a craving for which the eagle idealism is partly a cover:

And cavernous is that young dragon's jaw,
Crimson for all the fiery reptile saw
In time now coveted, for teeth to flay,
Once more consume, were Life recurrent May.
(p. 405)

Idealized love, demanding perfect repetitions of its own past, which cannot be fulfilled, ultimately destroys itself through the strength of its own demands. As Youth in Memory states it:

Responsive never to the soft desire
For one prized tune is this our chord of life.
'Tis clipped to deadness with a wanton knife,
In wishes that for ecstasies aspire.
(p. 406)

Here again, the Youth in Memory passage directly parallels the Modern Love passage:

Then each applied to each that fatal knife,
Deep questioning, which probes to endless dole.

In terms of Modern Love's image motifs, the fatal knife image is part of the murder-knife-wound-blood cluster running throughout the poem, and it is directly related, thematically, with the "arrow" of distrust motif of Stanza XXVI. The exact nature of the distrust and the "deep questioning" is, as I conjectured in the discussion of XXVI, an unwillingness to accept the main intention in human relationships, a holding of the loved one accountable for every thought and impulse as well as for overt actions. It is thus an over-idealized demand for perfection in human nature, and it is also--as the next lines of Stanza L indicate--an egoistic demand for certainty in an uncertain world:

Ah, what a dusty answer gets the soul
When not for certainities in this our life!--

(The images of dust and hotness here recall the "dust for fire" imagery in XLI.) As Friedman indicates ("The Fire of Renewal," p. 372), it is, in Meredith's view, excessive idealism and Egoism which demands any sort of intellectual certainty from the future. As Meredith writes in The Question Whither:

Our questions are a mortal brood,
Our work is everlasting . . .
(p. 339)

and again in A Faith on Trial:

Spirit raves not for a goal.
(p. 359)

This does not mean, as I have said before, that there is in Meredith's view no cumulative value to experience and no indication of enduring value, but that such indication is only apprehendable to the soul recognizing its own nature (i.e., with Blood, Brain, and Spirit in balance) and alive to the complexities of an ever-changing present. As Youth in Memory tell us:

Only the soul can walk the dusty track
Where hangs our flowering under vapours black,
And bear to see how these pervade, obscure,
Quench recollection of a spacious pure.
(p. 406)

Thus in Stanza XLVII, the husband, who "had not to look back on summer joys,/ Or forward to a summer of bright dye," yet grew in spirit in the "largeness of the evening earth," and in this "hour," this "little moment," of the changing present, perceived "across the twilight wave/ The swan sail with her young beneath her wings"--perceived, that is, a life in death image in promise of enduring value.

And Stanza L itself, in its last four lines (lines which echo the ocean-wave-on-shore imagery of the climactic Stanza XLIII), concludes the poem with a similarly dark but hopeful pledge of enduring value:

In tragic hints here see what evermore
 Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,
 Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

Of these concluding lines of Modern Love, much has been written, but despite the almost universal praise for their metaphorical power, Friedman's two commentaries were the first to clarify their specific thematic content. Thus Trevelyan writes of "words worthy of a Greek tragedian" and of "an ancient metaphor," in "form . . . surpassed by no other form in the literature of the world," but of the meaning itself, he can say only that the lines speak of "the abortive but majestic force of so much in human life."¹¹⁵ Mrs. Henderson, too, is much taken with the "beauty and power" of the metaphor, but sees in it only "an image embodying the conflicting majesty and futility of human endeavour," a "crown upon [the poet's] vision of mortality."¹¹⁶

In the same passage, Richard H. P. Curle sees only "the 'faint thin line' of supposition" left upon the shore;¹¹⁷ and Day Lewis, in a much longer commentary, in which he compares the Meredith image favorably with Arnold's ocean image in "Dover Beach," really gets very little further than Curle in clarifying what he sees as the "volume of mystery" in the lines:

¹¹⁵Poetry and Philosophy, p. 33.

¹¹⁶George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer, p. 73.

¹¹⁷Aspects of George Meredith (London, 1908), p. 196.

What is it that 'evermore moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force'? Is it death? Is it the truth which the poet has just declared to be so elusive for the soul 'hot for certainties in this our life'? Is it not something that subsumes both--the circumambient Unknown whose volume of mystery presses upon the mortal heart and breaking there, leaves only a 'faint thin line' of experience by which its force may be felt, its nature dimly understood? If this image falls a little short of perfection, it is not because it fails to supply a key to the pattern which it reveals, but because its own surface pattern is over-complicated: the 'ramping hosts of warrior horse', a simile within the simile, distracts us, with a too vivid suggestion of some inimical force, from the main theme."¹¹⁸

In answer to Lewis's objection to the horse simile within the sea simile, Friedman points out "not only that the horse-sea linkage is a standard mythological one (Poseidon-chariot-charger-waves) but also that it is a very frequent one in Meredith's poetry" ("The Jangled Harp," p. 9). The key to the central meaning of these last four lines of Modern Love, Friedman finds in Youth in Memory, the poem from which I have several times quoted above to indicate parallels to previous lines in Stanza L.¹¹⁹ In Youth in Memory, as Friedman indicates, 'old men, by facing and accepting their past as it is, can win their way through to a resolution of their imbalance (i.e., their egoistic thirsting after physical fulfillment), and thus purged, can salvage their past in memory':¹²⁰

Forth of such passage through black fire we win
Clear hearing of the simple lute,
Whereon, and not on other, Memory plays
For them who can in quietness receive
Her restorative airs: a ditty thin

¹¹⁸The Poetic Image, pp. 58-59.

¹¹⁹I am indebted to Friedman for first calling my attention to Youth in Memory, but I use this poem for much more extensive comparisons to Stanza L than does Friedman, who quotes only from the long passage cited below.

¹²⁰I am here paraphrasing from both "The Fire of Renewal," p. 373, and "The Jangled Harp," p. 24.

As note of hedgerow bird in ear of eve,
 Or wave at ebb, the shallow catching rays
 On a transparent sheet, where curves a glass
 To truer heavens than when the breaker neighs 121
 Loud at the plunge for bubbly wreck in roar
 Solidity and bulk and martial brass,
 Once tyrants of the senses, faintly score
A mark on pebbled sand or fluid slime,
 While present in the spirit, vital there,
 Are things that seemed the phantoms of their time;
 Eternal as the recurrent cloud, as air
 Imperative, refreshful as dawn-dew.

Of this passage in relationship to the Modern Love stanza, Friedman writes:

The crash and roar of the wave of life upon the shore of the heart represents the suffering and turmoil of fighting one's way through Blood to Brain and Spirit. Out of this bubble and wreck emerges all that remains of a purely sensory life: a thin mark left upon the shore by the withdrawing wave. The senses are then transmuted (after the turmoil), and in their place is a clear wisdom which once seemed ungraspable--that life, like the recurring seasons, dies only to be perpetually reborn. Yet Modern Love could reach only the mark-on-shore stage of this image; the wreck of Egoism leaves that faint thin line on the shore. But the wave has ebbed leaving us a clue to the cloud and air and dawn-dew: we must die to ourselves in order that we may live.¹²²

Friedman's reading here--that the "faint thin line" left by the turmoil of sensory experience may be transmuted to the "clear wisdom . . . that life, like the recurring seasons, dies only to be perpetually reborn"--is, I believe, the correct one and precisely stated. His subsequent phrasing seems to indicate, however, that he does not find in Modern Love any evidence that the husband himself has yet reached that clear wisdom, only that he has undergone the kind of experience that may lead to such wisdom.

¹²¹For additional examples of the horse-sea linkage in Meredith's poetry, see the "swift foam-snorting steeds" image in The Shipwreck of Idomeneus (p. 67) and the epic simile comparing the surging waves to "fiery steeds" later in the same poem (p. 69).

¹²²"The Fire of Renewal," pp. 373-374.

As I have indicated, I do think that the husband--in the image which concludes Stanza XLVII (a stanza, by the way, remarkable for its feeling of tranquility, of the cessation of turmoil)--does achieve just such a vision of death and rebirth. The image used there, of the swan, with her young, is a rare image in Meredith's poetry, and it is thus understandable that Friedman, approaching Modern Love through those images which tend to recur throughout the whole bulk of Meredith's verse, should have failed to note it. It is, however, a singularly beautiful image, and should, I believe, be considered to carry the final wisdom of the poem, that wisdom which the concluding lines of Stanza L indicate is possible. It might also be noted that--like the images of Stanza XLIII, the climactic stanza as far as the dramatic tension of the poem is concerned--the image in Stanza XLVII shares with the concluding image of L the basic ocean wave motif:

Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
This little moment mercifully gave,
Where I have seen across the twilight wave
The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

One final commentary on Stanza L should perhaps be noted here. Of the last four lines, Norman Kelvin writes:

Norman Friedman tells us that the "ramping hosts of warrior horse" are the irrational impulses of the blood divided from the brain and that the "faint thin line" is the chosen few, who have learned to balance blood, brain, and spirit, Meredith's spiritual triad.

My own reading of these lines is similar but not the same. The "ramping hosts" are indeed the irrational drives of mankind, but they are "thundering" through history, conceived of as an evolutionary process. The "faint thin line" is composed of men who have emerged somewhat wiser and better from both personal and historical struggle. I believe this historical, or evolutionary, reading is necessary to explain the force and movement of the imagery; to explain why the "faint thin line" emerges from the ranks of the warrior horse.¹²³

¹²³A Troubled Eden, p. 26.

Although Kelvin paraphrases Friedman in a rather confused way, his own "historical" reading of the lines is worth consideration. To my mind, Friedman's reading of the lines on the personal level is certainly the primary one, but such a reading on one level need not of course exclude a second reading on another level. That Meredith was an evolutionist in his wider philosophical thought is amply evident in his later poetry, and Youth in Memory does in fact indicate that he, at least later, thought of this mark-on-shore image as having wider implications. Thus the passage from Youth in Memory quoted above continues:

Some evanescent hand on vapour scrawled
Historic of the soul, and heats anew
 Its coloured lines where deeds of flesh stand bald.
True of the man, and of mankind 'tis true.
 (p. 407)

I do not see, as Kelvin writes, that such a "historical, or evolutionary, reading is necessary [italics mine] to explain the force and movement of the imagery" in Modern Love--the personal struggle in Modern Love is, in fact, recorded with such force and movement repeatedly--but, at the same time, the power of the imagery, as of the struggle itself, is certainly sufficient to reverberate beyond the individual level and to carry such a wider meaning.

CHAPTER IV

AN ANALYSIS OF THE DRAMATIC STRUCTURE

The Basic Dramatic Structure

There are two major difficulties in defining and evaluating the dramatic structure of Modern Love. The first of these is that in many individual segments the action of the poem is itself difficult to apprehend. Amid the large number of seemingly merely lyric stanzas one tends to be uncertain as to what changes are actually taking place in the relationship between the husband and wife. These changes I have attempted to clarify in the preceding extended explication of the poem, although I realize that to some extent, even in that explication, the larger movements of the action may have remained somewhat obscure, as a result of the, as I see it, necessary preoccupation with details in clarifying the image patterns. This latter deficiency, however, I hope to remedy in the ensuing discussion by a much briefer and more selective summary of the action.

The second major difficulty is that in Modern Love the dramatic structure as a whole is based on a set of psychological, and to some extent sociological, assumptions that have never been very clearly formulated and that are not widely recognized even in a general way. I am here speaking of dramatic structure in terms of the Aristotelian theory that a dramatic action is a unified (complete and whole) action comprised

of a series of events bearing specific cause-and-effect relationships to one another; and it follows, I believe, that such cause-and-effect relationships, if they are to have any meaningful or effective existence for the reader, must themselves be based on a set of general assumptions that are known and accepted by the reader as true or operative.

This second major difficulty may be better understood if we contrast Modern Love to Shakespeare's Othello, a domestic tragedy to which the husband himself invites contrast in Stanza XV:

Sleep on: it is your husband, not your foe.
 The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love
Frights not our modern dames:--well if he did!

In the case of Othello, the major sociological assumption, widely familiar to Shakespeare's audience, is that a husband upon discovering the infidelity of a wife might very probably punish that infidelity by an act of extreme violence, toward the wife as well as toward the lover, such violence being generally condoned by the social mores of the time and place in which the action of the play is set. And the major psychological assumption is that a husband schooled in the "trade of war" and bearing within himself "barbaric blood" would be most likely to resort to such an act of violence.

Because these major sociological and psychological assumptions are clearly understood and familiar to the reader, the reader fairly early in the play begins to set up the major "if" condition (the major cause-and-effect relationship) on which he expects the dramatic action to turn, and that condition is that "if" Othello becomes convinced that Desdemona has been guilty of infidelity with Cassio, Othello will commit an act of extreme violence; that is, he will most likely kill Desdemona. With this major "if" condition in mind, the reader is then able to set up, more or less clearly in his mind, a number of contributing minor "if" conditions

which might accumulatively and progressively bring this major condition into existence. There is, for example, the specific series of "if" conditions that are set up concerning the handkerchief which Othello had given to Desdemona: if Emilia, finding the handkerchief, gives it to Iago; if Iago successfully plants it on Cassio; if Desdemona appears to lie about the handkerchief; and, finally, if Othello can be made to see the handkerchief in Cassio's possession. And it is, of course, the fulfillment of these conditions (together with other, mostly less specific, conditions) which brings us to the climactic moment in the action, when Othello cries: "Get me some poison, Iago; this night," and is told by Iago to "strangle her in her bed, even the bed she hath contaminated." The artistic effect of the unfolding of such a series of clearly understood cause-and-effect relationships as these is of course to create increasing suspense prior to the climactic moment (which in turn enhances our sensations of fear, in the Aristotelian sense) and to create a sense of logical satisfaction, the fulfillment of our expectancy, when the climactic result has occurred.

Now obviously the major sociological and psychological assumptions which underlie the dramatic structure of Othello are not in effect (or at least in no significant degree in effect) in the dramatic structure of Modern Love. As the husband himself says, "The Poet's black stage-lion of wronged love/ Frights not our modern dames." Mid-Victorian English social mores do not condone the murder of one's wife, even for infidelity; and, psychologically speaking, the husband himself is by no means a "black stage-lion"--a semi-barbaric man of action and sudden violence; he is instead a highly intellectual, highly introspective "civilized" man who 'grieves' at "the wild beast in him" (IX), and who, 'fainting' "on his

vengefulness," 'smites himself,' "a shuddering heap of pain" (II).

Nor are "demonstrations of proof" of the wife's relationship with the other man a very significant contributing factor anywhere in the dramatic structure of Modern Love. In Stanza XV, the stanza from which I have just quoted, the husband confronts the wife with a letter "lately sent" to the other man, expressing her affection for him, but the husband was already jealous of the other man, and this "discovery" causes no further significant change in the couple's relationship. And later in the poem, when the husband observes the wife and her friend touching hands in the woods--the husband is himself at the time with his blonde Lady (XXXIX)--this second "discovery" again makes no direct contribution to a major turning point in the dramatic action (there is an indirect contribution here which may be apparent later).

Because of the comparative sparsity of "objective" incidents in the poem, and because of the apparent lack of consequence of the most obvious of those objective incidents that are present, one tends, indeed, to doubt that there is any true dramatic structure in Modern Love, any unified series of cause-and-effect events leading to a major turning point in the action. We must, in fact, examine the action of the poem largely in terms of subjective events, and in terms of a set of psychological assumptions concerning the probable "subjective" reactions of the two characters to such "objective" events as do occur, before we can very adequately understand the dramatic structure.

We should note here that we can speak of sociological assumptions in regard to Modern Love for the most part only in terms of negatives. In the mid-Victorian "civilized" setting of Modern Love there are no clear-cut social prescriptions for the kind of failure of confidence in one

another which besets the couple in the poem, especially in the absence of any full-fledged adulterous affair on the part of either of the two. Such social pressure as does exist tends mainly, in fact, in the direction of forcing the couple to act, hypocritically, as if nothing at all were wrong between them, and while this is a vexing pressure, it is not a decisive one. We must concern ourselves, then, mainly with the psychological assumptions.

The basic psychological assumption on which the poem rests is that tragedy will result when the couple have had torn away from them their last vestige of sentimental faith (each in himself as well as each in the function of their love relationship) and have at the same time found nothing adequate with which to replace this faith. What this faith consists of, at least in part, is that they are, each by virtue of his own worthiness for a higher love and capacity to love on a higher plane, exempt from sensualism, from the compulsions of animal passion, the proof of this worthiness and capacity being a function of their love relationship, their previous relationship being such that they have always believed themselves motivated by a higher attraction rather than by mere sexual drives.¹

¹The fear of recognizing sexual passion as such in love relationships may be, it seems to me, more widely pervasive than is commonly thought. This fear may stem, I believe, not merely from puritanical or other traditional moral concepts, but from the initially realistic observation that sexual passion, although intense, is by nature transient and unselective. And instead of balancing this uncertainty by reliance on other more stable but still realistic elements in the relationship, the common human tendency is to fantasize a "higher" or "special" attraction and to attempt to sustain it by "misreading" the actual sexual attraction when it is present and by drawing on other emotional reservoirs when the sexual drive is absent. Since there is an element of fantasy involved, the dynamics of such an adjustment may be ultimately much more unstable

With this major psychological assumption stated in such general terms, we can begin to set up a major "if" condition on which we might expect the dramatic action of Modern Love to turn, and that condition is that if the two are brought to see themselves engaged in significant sexual activity which is plainly not motivated by any higher attraction, then they must recognize the failure of their sentimental conceptions. Even here, we must further qualify this condition and try to render it more specific. First we may note that a "minor" sexual infraction on the part of either of the two with a third party would not be likely to fulfill the condition; that is, if the husband should momentarily accept a purely physical distraction or if the wife should in a single moment of weakness yield to the other man, these momentary "frailties" would not necessarily demonstrate to the couple their final unworthiness for or incapacity for the kind of "spiritual" love they seek. Obviously a much larger quantity of adulterous and cynical sexual activity on the part of either would tend to destroy their sentimental faith, but this is never a very probable condition within the context of Modern Love.

Second, we may note that a shift by either toward a sentimental love relationship with a third party, even though such a relationship might lead to sexual relations with that third party (as is the tendency with

than the original realistic uncertainty.

On another level the fear of "animal" passion may be connected with our larger fear of our "animal" mortality, as opposed to our hope, even beyond traditional religious conceptions, for some form of "intellectual" or "spiritual" permanence.

Finally, in Freudian terms, we may also trace the fear of recognizing sexual passion as such to the parent-child relationship--which is likely to be the one relationship of all relationships which the individual has experienced which has seemed the safest and most permanent, and at the same time the one in which overt sexual passion is the least appropriate.

the wife's friendship with the other man and as becomes the case with the husband's flirtation with his blonde Lady) would not with any direct or immediate conclusiveness shatter the faith of either in his own capacity for and worthiness for a higher love, though it must bring the validity of the feelings of each as concerns the first relationship into serious question.

We are left then to examine the condition of a resumption of sexual relations between the husband and wife, and here we can see a condition which might prove more conclusive. If these two, who have by virtue of their past experience a strong "spiritual" investment in one another, should be brought to resume sexual relations not by virtue of their past "spiritual" bond or of any present "spiritual" attraction but by virtue of what they themselves must recognize as mere sexual attraction and sexual jealousy, then their own conceptions of themselves and of the functioning of their love relationship must be seriously shaken and, barring a replacement for the faith that these conceptions have afforded them, tragedy must ensue. This is, of course, the condition of which the husband speaks in Stanza XLIII, and it is the condition which he himself identifies as the conclusive one in that stanza:

If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
I never could have made it half so sure,
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!

Once we have formulated it, we can appreciate the abstract logic of this cause-and-effect relationship, and it is also, I think, a cause-and-effect phenomenon that we may recognize as common to actual human experience; but even so this is not, as it seems to me, a formulation that springs to mind very readily, at least in its precise form.

We must also consider whether there are any clear-cut contributing factors, any minor "if" conditions, which might be expected to lead to the major "if" condition that we have formulated--that is, any conditions that might lead the couple to a resumption of sexual relations while at the same time failing to contribute to or actually inhibiting their "higher" confidence in themselves and in one another. Here we can see that a flirtation with a third party on the part of the first of the two would certainly tend to inhibit the confidence of the second of the two in the "spiritual" worth of the first, while at the same time the first must tend to doubt his own capacity for a higher attraction to two people at once--"Can I love one,/ And yet be jealous of another?" as the husband says in Stanza XL. But we may also see that such a flirtation on the part of only one of the two would not be very likely to lead to a resumption of sexual relations between the two, the one involved in the flirtation being attracted elsewhere, with no new motivation toward his former love, and the one not involved being at least partially inhibited by pride and the fear of being rebuffed from asking for, or even submitting to, a resumption of the relationship.

However, we may see that a flirtation with a third party on the part of each of the two simultaneously would inhibit the confidence of each in the spiritual worth of the other as well as in his own capacity to love in two directions at once; and at the same time that such a flirtation on the part of each of the two would be quite likely to motivate the two toward a resumption of their sexual relations, each triggered by jealousy at seeing the other, at least figuratively, in the embrace of another ("How many a thing which we cast to the ground,/ When others pick it up becomes a gem!" as the husband says in XLI), and each, at the same time,

relieved from the inhibitions of his pride by seeing the other in the same situation as himself and by feeling himself desirable, at least physically, not simply to the original partner but to the flirtation partner as well.

Thus we are able to formulate a complex of minor "if" conditions which would be fairly likely to contribute to the major "if" condition we have previously formulated, and again we can appreciate the abstract logic of the formulation, and we can as well, I think, observe quite frequently the same set of cause-and-effect relationships operating in actual experience. But once again this formulation is not one that occurs to us very readily or immediately: our first reaction would be, I think, to imagine that a flirtation on the part of both parties in the original relationship would simply lead the couple further from any kind of relationship with one another (which must remain a possibility), rather than toward a resumption of sexual relations as we have here formulated.

Meredith himself has of course been at pains to formulate the abstractions underlying the dramatic structure of Modern Love as he goes along in such phrases as those already quoted--

Can I love one,
And yet be jealous of another?
(XL)

How many a thing which we cast to the ground,
When others pick it up becomes a gem!
(XLI)

and

If I the death of Love had deeply planned,
I never could have made it half so sure,
As by the unblest kisses which upbraid
The full-waked sense; or failing that, degrade!
(XLIII)

but such statements voiced through the mind of the husband, as these are, tend to be in the nature of statements after the fact, and thus they cannot function very well to clarify the dramatic structure for the reader in advance, which means that the reader tends to miss the dramatic movement of the poem on an initial reading.

Besides the major "if" condition and the complex of minor contributing "if" conditions that I have here discussed, there are of course other conditions in Modern Love which tend toward the general dissolution of the couple's love relationship. Obviously the breakdown in communication between the two; the wife's repeated rebuffing of the husband's advances at those times when his pride still allows him to make advances; the husband's growing neglect of his wife in his interest in his blonde Lady; and especially the husband's progressively more serious acts of verbal cruelty toward the wife, all tend to the destruction of their relationship, but these types of phenomena merely in themselves cannot constitute an effective dramatic structure, for there is no way to formulate the exact number of such phenomena which would cause a major change in the relationship between the two. That is, if it takes an indefinite number of individual incidents to cause a change--for example, an indefinite number of rebuffs or an indefinite number of acts of verbal cruelty--then we cannot be certain that the cause will become operative at all and we obviously cannot "foresee" any specific time when the effect will occur if it is going to occur.

These types of phenomena do of course contribute to a "sense" of dramatic progression, and they do actually tend to bring about the minor contributing "if" conditions--i.e., the flirtations on the part of each with a third party--that I have previously discussed, but they cannot

contribute directly to effective dramatic suspense and an effective dramatic climax as can the more or less specific sexual events which comprise the flirtations and the one major sexual event which I have previously identified as the major "if" condition of the poem (I am here speaking of "sexual events" not necessarily in the sense of sexual consummations but in the sense of those instances of significantly more than usual sexual stimulation and of significantly different awareness of stimulation--examples of which will be forthcoming).

I have thus far discussed the dramatic structure of Modern Love somewhat in terms of abstractions, and I have also directed my attention almost entirely to what may be called the "middle" of the dramatic structure. I should now like briefly to summarize the action of the whole poem and to examine the dramatic structure as a whole action consisting of beginning, middle, and end.

Partly by its use of an inverted syntax--starting with a preposition with an indefinite pronoun for object ("By this"), and partly by its plunging into the midst of a highly emotional situation, Modern Love gives the impression of beginning its action in medias res. And if we were to consider that the action of the poem is the dissolution of the whole relationship between the couple, then we would obviously be plunged somewhere into the middle of that action, since the dissolution must have had its beginning at some time considerably earlier, perhaps in the husband's ignoring of the wife in favor of his work (as vaguely suggested in Stanza X); perhaps in the wife's making the acquaintance of a man whose temperament is especially appealing to her (this or anything particular about the other man is never indicated, however); or perhaps in any of the innumerable small erosions in understanding and interest which time

may effect in a marriage relationship.

If, however, we consider that the action of the poem is the specific dissolution of the couple's sentimental conception of themselves, as I think we should, then we may see that the narrative beginning of the poem coincides with the significant beginning of the dramatic action. I have previously defined that sentimental conception as one in which the couple have seen themselves as always motivated in their love relationship not by mere passion but by a "higher" attraction. And while the couple may have been led to cease marital relations because they may have "felt," perhaps subconsciously, the erosion of the "higher" attraction, nevertheless in those troubled sexual relations that may have preceded the cessation, their conscious sentimental faith would have been largely sustained by the momentum of their habitual conceptions. Thus, as it seems to me, their sentimental faith is brought into serious question only when they have definitely ceased their habitual relationship and are faced with controlling or justifying those sexual impulses which subsequently spring into being. The cessation of normal marital relations thus marks the true beginning of the action of Modern Love, all that is lacking at the point of the narrative beginning being expository material rather than any significant previous action. Of expository material itself very little is needed, and certainly Meredith supplies very little at any point in the narrative.

Following the cessation of marital relations, as indicated in Stanza I, the husband, in Stanzas II through IX, is repeatedly subjected to sexually stimulating situations--the sexual attraction very subtly imaged in Stanzas II ("And if their smiles encountered"), III ("It cannot be such harm on her cool brow/ To put a kiss"), and VI ("It chanced his lips did meet her forehead cool"), and more obviously indicated in V (where the husband visits the wife's dressing room), VII (where he sees her emerging from her

dressing room, looking radiantly beautiful), and IX (where he walks with her at dusk, and she leans near him, looking up). In these encounters, the husband does not, of course, always conceive of the sexual attraction as such. He is still largely governed by his sentimental conception of the wife as "angel," turned by her failure to keep faith with him into a "temptress" (see page 78 for additional discussion). Thus, in those moments when he is yet able to believe that she still loves him as she did--e.g., "But she is mine!" (III), and "The 'What has been' a moment seemed his own" (V)--he would still tend to conceive of the attraction as a "higher" one; and in those moments that he feels that she has broken faith, he would tend consciously to experience the attraction as revulsion--e.g., "He sickened as at breath of poison-flowers" (II), and "O bitter barren woman!" (VI).

There are, of course, times when the husband does recognize his own potentiality for sensualism and in which he feels that the wife must be protected from him (as in IX, for example), but this does not negate the basic sentimental conception. The sentimentalist recognizes that he has a sensual side to his nature; he simply does not conceive of this sensual feeling as a function of his love relationship and believes that he should be able to avoid its governance entirely.

Throughout these stanzas the wife consistently rebuffs the husband's tentative advances, or more accurately ignores the attraction that she exerts for him altogether. And the husband is prevented by pride and the fear of a more overt rebuff from making any more obvious advances. Thus, having tacitly agreed to a cessation of marital relations in I (and having obviously facilitated this agreement by taking separate bedrooms--see p. 74), the couple, in these stanzas, experience no major and specific phenomena

which would seem capable of breaking the sexual stalemate in which they find themselves.

In the first nine stanzas of the poem, we have then an "exciting force" and a dramatic tension created, and we have a "sense" of "rising action" (in a very general way, we see that the dramatic tension might be resolved by some sort of act of sensual passion on the husband's part), but in these first nine stanzas there are no specific "if" conditions suggested which might be expected to bring the tension to a resolution.

The next four stanzas, X through XIII, are almost entirely lyric (or philosophizing) stanzas in which the husband alternately blames the wife for shattering his faith in nature and nature for making no provisions for love. Together they indicate the husband's growing bitterness and intellectual cynicism, but they make no significant additional contribution to the dramatic movement.

Stanzas XIV through XX show the husband toying with, but still rejecting, the idea of starting a flirtation of his own. And here, of course, we do have the first suggestion of a specific "if" condition which might be expected to significantly affect the couple's relationship. There is, in fact, a suggestion in XIV that such a flirtation might tend not, as one might first suppose, to drive the couple further apart in every way, but that it might tend to motivate a renewal of relations between them ("It seems there is another veering fit,/ Since on a gold-haired lady's eyeballs pure/ I looked with little prospect of a cure,/ . . . I open an old book, and there I find/ That 'Women still may love whom they deceive'"). But the flirtation suggested here is not actually a reality as yet; and the husband does not really conceive of himself as being in the same position as the wife, so that he is still scornful at

the moment of the idea of a renewal of relations by reason of such motivation. For the moment, the husband's feeling of moral superiority tends simply to release his bitterness toward the wife, thus motivating the rather gratuitous act of cruelty in XV when he confronts the wife with a letter she has written to the other man.

The next stanza, XVI, is basically a flashback stanza with the husband remembering their past felicity, but Stanza XVII returns, indirectly, to a flirtation motif. Forced by social contingencies to be something other than themselves, that is, to act like lovers when they are not, the couple in effect sexually flirt with one another on a superficial level, the moral counterpart of which would be a casual flirtation with a stranger ("Such play as this the devils might appal!" as the husband notes in this stanza). In Stanza XVIII the flirtation motif again appears, with the husband remembering a youthful and, as it then seemed to him, innocent flirtation, though he wryly doubts that for the dancers on the village green, there is any legitimate "secret of the bull and lamb," that is, any real sexual innocence in such casual flirtation.

And in Stanza XIX, the husband continues to reject the idea of any present flirtation for himself, apparently thinking again of the possibility of beginning one with the blonde Lady. But he is also, in this stanza, acutely aware of the misery of his present situation.

Finally, in the last stanza of this series, Stanza XX, the husband, finding a memento of a former amour in an old desk, does for a moment recognize that he is capable of being governed in love relationships by sensual passion and does feel that he should take responsibility for his passion. Thus recognizing his own fallibility, he does, for a moment, feel generous toward his wife's fallibility, but this momentary insight

does not stem from his present experience, and does not significantly alter his present pattern of sentimental thought. It is, indeed, typical of Meredith's very accurate observation of psychological phenomena, as it seems to me, that his characters are frequently inconsistent in their thought, that they are capable of compartmentalized thinking (double-think), and that their merely intellectual insights are given permanence and are translated into character patterns only by their more immediate and larger experience, rather than by merely tangential experience.

In the series of stanzas we have just examined, then, the possibility of the husband's engaging in a sexual flirtation of his own is introduced, thus establishing a possible "if" condition for the dramatic structure, and suggesting as well a number of possible partial effects which such a flirtation might have on the husband's and the wife's attitudes, but for the time being the significant forward motion of this "if" condition is delayed.

In the next series of stanzas--XXI through XXVI--we see the husband and wife still caught in their sexual stalemate, but with the difference that the wife, too, now feels very strongly the effect of their separation: in XXI she faints when a mutual friend tells of "his passion's bashful dawn/ And radiant culmination"; and in XXIII she is obviously shaken (as indicated by her "quick" heartbeat beneath the coverlet) when she is forced, while visiting with friends, to share an attic room with her husband. The husband too feels very strongly the sexual frustration of their forced proximity in this stanza, but his sexual feeling in all of these stanzas is much too mixed-in with injured sentimental pride and bitterness for him to be willing to make the first gesture toward a reconciliation. Although the degree of their subconscious sexual frustration

is obviously increasing in these stanzas, and although they are placed in painful sexual proximity on the one occasion, there is no other new condition, that is, no specifically sexual jealousy aroused, in these stanzas to trigger a resumption of marital relations: the husband has not yet begun a flirtation of his own, and the wife's flirtation, if it can be called that, is for practical purposes inactive at the present time. As indicated in XXIV the husband does not now think of her relationship to the other man in sexual terms, but rather in terms of a spiritual offense.

In the next series of stanzas--XXVII through XXXIII--the husband, stalemated by his pride and bitterness in his relationship with his wife, does start a flirtation with the blonde Lady, first attempting cynically to accept his sexual attraction as no more than sensualism (XXVII-XXX), and then, uncomfortable in that conception, attempting to tell himself that the attraction is mainly intellectual (XXXI-XXXIII). In these stanzas, the forward motion of the minor "if" condition we formulated is accelerated, then, though to some extent the "drift" of these particular stanzas is in something of a false direction. That is, neither the exaggerated cynicism nor the attempt to convince himself that his attraction is mainly intellectual seems central to the husband's nature--neither experience seems meaningful enough to test his deeper experience with his wife--so that for the time being these stanzas do have something of the effect for the reader that the husband declares that the experience has for him--they do seem something of a "distraction" and a letting down of the immediate emotional tension of the poem.

However, the next two stanzas, which shift the focus once again to the husband's relationship with his wife, do show that the tension between

them has increased considerably. The husband is especially cold and cruel to the wife in XXXIV; and the wife (deeply wounded herself) returns his bitterness upon him in XXXV, when the social exigencies of the "Forfeits" game place them once more in a sexually stimulating situation. Stanza XXXVI then brings the wife and the blonde Lady together and shows each of them as already at least intuitively jealous of the other at this point. And next, Stanza XXXVII, a deceptively "calm" stanza as I have attempted to indicate in my detailed explication (p. 152), shows all three--the husband, wife, and blonde Lady--in a springtime setting strongly imbued with sexual feeling.

Stanzas XXXVIII and XXXIX then show the husband--unable any longer to deny his strong physical attraction--bringing his affair with My Lady to a consummation, and attempting at the same time to invest his deeper feeling in her, to cast a sentimental aura over their relationship, and thus to create a significant experience capable of replacing his experience with his wife. The last lines of XXXIX show, of course, the failure of this attempt. When he sees the wife and her friend together in the woods, he is forced to recognize the strong sexual jealousy that he is still capable of feeling as concerns the wife. Here it might be suggested that while the wife's friendship with the other man is a long-standing one, and while there is little real objective indication even in this stanza that their relationship has changed to a sexual one, the specifically new element here is the husband's projection of his own sexual relationship with his Lady onto the wife and her friend when he sees them touching hands. Also, although there is no indication at all that the wife sees the husband in the woods, there is, I think, a sort of inherent assumption made by the reader that the wife would "sense" this final turn in the husband's

flirtation with his Lady, and would be rendered strongly jealous herself. In Stanza XXXIX, then, the full complex of minor "if" conditions of the poem--i.e., the complex of flirtations, immediately conceived of as sexual, on the part of both the husband and the wife--becomes strongly operative.

Stanzas XL and XLI then show the husband and wife moving, as expected, toward a resumption of their marital relationship, and also show that the husband, at least, has no sentimental illusions concerning his present attraction to his wife. Finally, in Stanza XLII, which shows the couple retiring to the wife's bed-chamber, the husband has a momentary romantic conception of the wife as "Pallas bold," but this immediately passes and he sees her only as a shamed wife, who sexually stimulates him, and upon whom he half forces his attentions as she falters, half-resisting. In this stanza, then, the major "if" condition of the poem--a resumption of sexual relations between the husband and wife which is plainly not motivated by any "higher" attraction--is fulfilled.

As indicated in my previous explication, Stanza XLIII--in its depiction of the violent sea-shore scene--images the climax of the poem as well as commenting on that climax.

After Stanza XLIII the rest of the poem and the rest of the dramatic structure consists of falling action and catastrophe. But before summarizing this falling action directly, a few more generalizations concerning the psychological assumptions underlying the poem may be helpful. First, we might consider--as concerns the husband--why an event which strips away sentimental illusions and thus prepares the way for a "healthier" or more "balanced" understanding of oneself should be conceived of as a tragic event. Here, an analogy between "sentimental" conceptions and

"neurotic" conceptions may be helpful. Although modern psychological theory holds that the tearing away of an individual's neurotic conceptions of himself may be ultimately beneficial, it nevertheless recognizes that that tearing away in itself may be extremely painful to the individual and may be felt even as a death or loss of a part of oneself. Although, as we shall see, this is not the sum of the husband's tragedy in the poem, it does account for a part of it.

Next, we should consider whether this event does actually tear away the wife's sentimental conception of herself, since she is shown in later stanzas as apparently still motivated by sentimental conceptions. Here again a comparison with modern psychological theory may be helpful. As modern psychological observation illustrates, a given event which would tend to break down the individual's neurotic conception of himself may, indeed, in practice break down that conception, thus making way for a healthier or more mature conception, or it may, on the other hand, drive the individual toward "psychosis," that is toward a psychological state in which the individual refuses to recognize and deal with "real" conditions in any effective way at all. That the wife does respond "unrealistically" to the conditions of her relationship with her husband following the attempt to resume marital relations is, I think, quite obvious: first, and to a lesser degree perhaps, in her refusal to accept the husband's offer of "Pity" and understanding, in XLVI; second, and to a greater degree, in her misapprehension of the husband's present feelings and intentions as regards the other woman, in XLVIII; and finally, and especially, in her conception that her suicide will in some way restore the husband's former "love" for her, in XLIX. As stated earlier, and in very general terms, the basic psychological assumption on which the poem rests is that

tragedy will result when the couple have had torn away from them their last vestige of sentimental faith (each in himself as well as each in the function of their love relationship) and have at the same time found nothing adequate with which to replace this faith. In effect, this is the case in the circumstances attendant on the resumption of marital relations. Although the husband shows a capacity to reach a more balanced conception of himself for the future, within the context of his relationship with his wife (given the wife's reaction) he does find nothing adequate with which to replace his former faith. And the wife, although she seems superficially to retain her former sentimental faith, does not actually retain it in relation to her real situation, but must instead move much more seriously into a world of fantasy--the fantasy itself being obviously an inadequate replacement for the former faith and one that does directly result in tragedy.

In making the above analogies between Meredith's psychological conceptions and modern psychological theory, I do not mean to imply that there is anything like a total correspondence between Meredith's conception of "sentimentalism" and the modern conception of "neuroticism" nor that Meredith ever formulated two separate categories of psychic phenomena, with a more or less clear-cut division between them, in the way that modern psychology has formulated the categories of "neurosis" and "psychosis"; but I do believe that there is a general correspondence between much of the psychic phenomena which Meredith describes and designates as "sentimental" and much of the psychic phenomena which modern psychologists describe and designate as "neurotic," and I also believe that the degree and form which the wife's "sentimentalism" takes after the sexual event recorded in Stanzas XLII and XLIII is at least roughly

correspondent to some of the kinds of phenomena which modern psychologists describe and designate as "psychotic."

The wife's suicide is of course the final action which completes the husband's tragic loss (as well as her own), and it does provide the "catastrophe" in the dramatic structure; but between the climax imaged in Stanza XLII and XLIII and the catastrophe in XLIX, there is a fairly complex "falling action" which we should now consider.

Stanza XLIV, in which the wife rejects "Pity" as a substitute for "Love" (as she conceives of it), contributes to a sense of the inevitability and irreversibility of the falling action which Stanza XLIII has begun. Stanza XLV, in which the husband remembers hopelessly his brief felicity with the blonde Lady, and in which the couple feel painfully but with fatalistic resignation their present estrangement and inability to communicate, further adds to this sense of inevitability.

Next, in Stanza XLVI, a slight hope is raised when the couple do at last "parley" and do make some tentative moves toward real communication. It should be noted here, however, that while the specifically narrative content of the stanza does contribute to a slight degree of hope, the diction of the stanza, as I pointed out in my previous explication (p. 174), tends instead to add to the sense of resolution and finality (e.g., "At last" and "It befell").

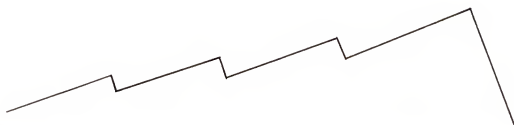
Stanza XLVII, with its powerfully evoked late evening setting, then contributes a highly effective scene of pathos, of quiet beauty, and of accepting resignation—all of which are qualities frequently found to greater or lesser degree in Shakespearean tragedy in scenes just prior to the catastrophe, for example, in Lear's reunion scenes with Cordelia; in Desdemona's "willow" song and Othello's "Put out the light, and then put

out the light" speech; in Hamlet's conversation with Horatio before the duel with Laertes; and perhaps, in a kind of indirect sense, in Macbeth's "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech. The effects of such a scene, as it seems to me, are to reaffirm the value of the thing lost in the tragic reversal and to reestablish the tragic hero's dignity. In doing so, such a scene thus contributes, I believe, to the qualities of "recognition" and "batharsis" in tragic drama, as these qualities are described or suggested by Aristotle.

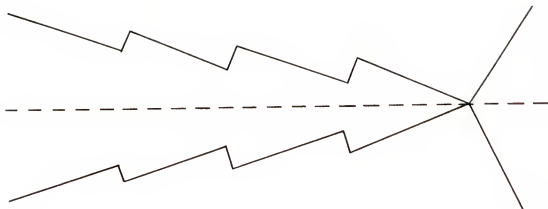
After the pause in the falling action in Stanzas XLVI and XLVII, Stanza XLVIII provides--in the wife's misunderstanding of the husband's intentions as concerns the other Lady and in her decision, motivated by "jealous devotion," to leave him free to seek the other Lady--what might be called the final aggravation or the final turning point in the falling action. Stanza XLIX then records, indirectly, the catastrophe, the wife's suicide by poison, which is the final result of her inability to face the reality of their situation. Stanza XLIX also contains an additional suggestion of the husband's "recognition" in the phrase "and he knew all," but his recognition of his responsibility and of the extent of his loss has of course been expressed in almost every stanza from the climax on, most especially in Stanzas XLIII and XLVII.

Since the objective or third-person narrative voice has been identified with the husband by subtle shifts in point of view throughout the poem, the final stanza may itself serve somewhat as an expression of the husband's "recognition," but its immediate form is third-person, and it thus provides also the effect of a final summation by the chorus as in Greek tragedy or of the final epitaph, usually spoken by a surviving lesser character, in Shakespearean tragedy.

Since the dramatic structure of Modern Love as a whole is quite complex, it may be helpful to supplement this summary and description of the structure with a graph illustrating the various curves and turning points in the dramatic action. Dramatic structure is frequently diagrammed simply by a series of progressively higher peaks in a jagged line, the individual segments of the line being either straight lines or rather indiscriminately shaped curves, with the highest peak of the line being understood to designate the climax in the structure, as in the following:



As I see it, there are two weaknesses to this kind of diagram. The first is that a single-line diagram is incapable of illustrating the dynamics or logic of the dramatic structure. That is, there is nothing in the diagram itself to determine the point at which the climax should occur: there is nothing to indicate--in the present diagram, for example--that the fourth upward swing of the line should not continue to rise past the point that it now does, or that it should not fall slightly and then begin a new rise to a higher peak. For this reason, a two-converging-lines, or mirror image, diagram (also fairly commonly used) seems to me to be much more meaningful:



Here the climactic point is clearly determined by the final contact with the other line, or with the mirror surface, as it were. For reasons of space, I will use simply the bottom line, plus the mirror line, with the point of contact between the two being understood as the determining point in the dramatic structure.

The other weakness of the type of diagram which I first illustrated has to do with the shape of the line, or segments of line, in between the minor turning points in the structure. Here, I think curved lines, discriminately formed, would be more meaningful, and I would, at least in dealing with a structure such as that of Modern Love, distinguish between two different types of dramatic curves. The first of these is what I would call the curve of the "felt tension" in the work. An example of this kind of "felt tension" may be seen in the first nine stanzas of the poem. As I mentioned before, we have in these stanzas a "sense" of "rising action"; we know that there is tension between the husband and wife resulting from their sexual frustration coupled with their distrust of one another since the cessation of marital relations, and we "feel" that this tension "increases" with the wife's repeated rebuffs of the husband's advances, but we do not in these stanzas foresee any specific event which

would tend to resolve this tension in one way or another.

To indicate such a "felt tension" or "sense" of rising action, as it exists by itself, I would use a curved line which is concave in relationship to the mirror surface line, as in the following:



What I am trying to indicate by this concave curve is that there is, in a series of minor advances and rebuffs, for example, a feeling of rising toward a confrontation of the forces in tension, but at the same time there is a feeling of moving away from such a confrontation. There is no specific incident toward which the minor incidents are definitely tending, and they may be tending away toward simply a stalemate. In the graph, such a curve may swell toward contact with the mirror line and conceivably bulge against it and be forced to break, but the exact point at which it will do so is very difficult to foresee: it never really seems to move toward a single decisive point of contact with the mirror line the way a convex curve would. I have called this movement in the action one type of dramatic curve, but it might be more accurate to call it a "pseudo-dramatic" curve, because it does not contribute very directly to an efficient dramatic structure.

The other type of dramatic curve that I would distinguish is what I would call the curve of "specific dramatic incident," that is, the movement of a series of specific minor incidents in a cause-and-effect manner

toward a single specific incident capable of marking a significant turning point in the dramatic action. This type of movement, which I think does comprize a true (or efficient) dramatic curve, can be seen to some degree in the action of Stanzas XIV through XX, where the husband toys with (though he finally rejects for the time) the idea of starting a flirtation of his own. This movement, which is at least in the direction of decisive specific incident, I would graph with a curve which is convex in relationship to the mirror surface line:

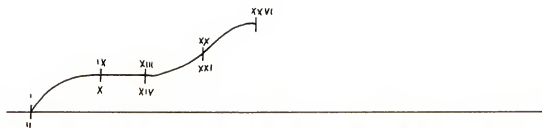


Here the overall "felt tension" of the poem does not advance greatly (it would be conceivable for the "felt tension" even to decrease for a time in such a movement), but the "direction" of the action's curve is now at least toward a single decisive incident in the dramatic structure--- just as the graph's curve is now in the direction of a single point of contact with the mirror line.

In my earlier summary of the dramatic movement of the poem, I said that the four stanzas X through XIII were for the most part lyric (or philosophizing) stanzas that did not make any significant advance in the dramatic movement. For the sake of convenience I will graph these stanzas simply with a straight horizontal line, so that we can now trace the diagram through Stanza XX as follows:

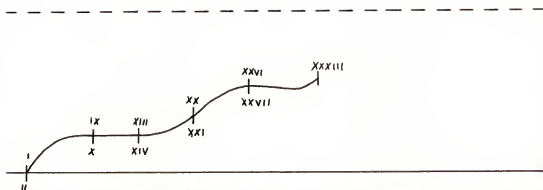


In Stanzas XXI through XXVI, we are again dealing for the most part with a curve of "felt tension." The sexual frustration and the emotional tension between the couple are felt to increase considerably in these stanzas, but with the husband no longer for the time considering a flirtation of his own there is no very recognizable tendency in the direction of specific incidents which might resolve the couple's stalemate. The diagram here then might be continued as follows:

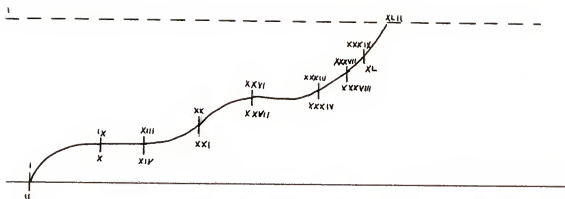


When, in Stanza XXVII, the husband does begin a flirtation of his own, we do start once again a curve of "specific dramatic incident." The "felt tension" in the next few stanzas—XXVII through XXXIII—on the other hand, seems to me actually to decrease for a time, with the husband's (and the reader's) "distraction" away from the situation with the wife, though in XXXIV (when our attention is turned once more to the relationship with the wife) the "felt tension" does seem to have risen over what

it was in the stanzas preceding this section. I would then graph this section of the structure as follows:

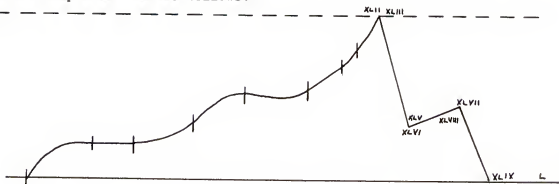


In the next series of stanzas--XXXIV through XXXVII--the husband's flirtation and projected affair with the Lady remains somewhat in the background, though still potential, while the "felt tension" of the poem continues to rise considerably in the encounters between the husband and wife and later when all three are thrown together. Here perhaps a straight line, rising on a diagonal, might best suggest the direction of the dramatic movement. Stanzas XXXVIII and XXXIX then show the husband moving definitely toward the consummation of his affair with his Lady; and next, following the scene in the woods where the husband sees the wife with her friend (in XXXIX), Stanzas XL through XLII show the husband and wife moving almost directly toward a resumption of marital relations, and thus toward the climax of the dramatic structure. In graphing the movement of these last two short sections, the convex curve might be resumed, with a "turning point" understood at the end of XXXIX (though the upward sweep of the line is by now so acute that it is difficult to indicate such a "turn" on the diagram). Adding on the combined three sections from Stanza XXXIV through Stanza XLII, we can now diagram the complete "rising action" of the poem as follows:



Although there is, perhaps, always something a little fanciful and inexact about any kind of line diagram of a dramatic structure, I do think that the curved line graph that I have here presented does "suggest" the movement of the rising action of Modern Love with considerably more accuracy than would the usual kind of diagram.

As concerns the "falling action" of the poem, on the other hand, I can see no advantage in a curved line drawing, and I shall for the sake of simplicity employ straight lines here. As I see it, the falling action slopes downward from Stanza XLIII through Stanza XLV; then pauses in its fall and perhaps is slightly reversed with the hope of meaningful communication that is raised in Stanzas XLVI and XLVII; and finally continues its fall from Stanza XLVIII on to the catastrophe in Stanza XLIX. Stanza L is, of course, simply a choral summary and is not part of the dramatic structure as such. The diagram for the whole dramatic structure can be completed then as follows:



In the preceding discussion and summary my intention has been to show that Modern Love does have a "true" dramatic structure based at key points on specific incidents bearing "foreseeable" cause-and-effect relationships to one another. This is not to say of course that the dramatic structure has been "foreseen" by--and thus has operated with total efficiency for--most of the readers of the poem in the past. In a review of the first edition in 1862, the critic for The Athenaeum wrote:

The story of 'Modern Love' is rather hinted at than told. There is nothing of orderly statement and little of clear and connected suggestion. These sonnets resemble scattered leaves from the diary of a stranger. The allusions, the comments, the interjections, all refer to certain particulars which are not directly related, and have to be painfully deduced.²

And in 1911, Adolphus Alfred Jack--whose short commentary is in most respects highly perceptive, and who felt that the poem was plain, once the effort had been made to "puzzle out" the story--still spoke of Modern Love as having an "outstanding weakness" in that

It is a tale of love ceasing to burn and then sputtering out. Two wedded people cease to love mutually--that is all. Unless there is scandal to force a crisis, the unhappy partnership continues, and the tale is the tale of two lives dragging on. The stately end invented by Meredith is not true to life. It is a concession to the claims of traditional art, and while there is thus a gain in poetical effect, it is at the expense of the truth of nature.³

"The stately end," to which Jack refers here, is--it seems obvious from the context--the wife's suicide, not the sexual and psychological events imaged in Stanzas XLII and XLIII, the point that I have indicated as the climax of the dramatic structure. Given the kind of psychological

²May 31, 1862, p. 719.

³"Meredith--Intellectual Poetry," Poetry and Poems: being Essays on Modern English Poetry (London, 1911), p. 220 (footnote).

breakdown--the kind of failure of sentimental (or neurotic) conceptions--that I have described as occurring in Stanzas XLII and XLIII, the wife's suicide does not seem to me to be 'untrue' to Nature--such suicides may not be common but they do occur among those suffering from acute psychological breakdowns, and some sort of extreme and self-punishing behavior in such cases is perhaps rather more common than not.

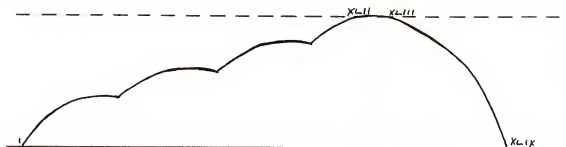
But this is not the real point at issue in quoting Mr. Jack's statement. The point is that he seems not to recognize that any sort of decisive point at all has been reached in the structure before the wife's suicide. And indeed as late as 1953, in his book Art and Substance in George Meredith: A Study in Narrative, Walter Francis Wright could still state: "The climax in Modern Love is the suicide of the wife and the defection of the husband"⁴--a misunderstanding, as it seems to me, either of the structure of the poem or of dramatic nomenclature, since the wife's suicide, as I have attempted to demonstrate, is the "catastrophe" of the poem, not the "climax."

Although other critics from time to time have spoken of the form of Modern Love as "dramatic" or "monodramatic"⁵ and although some have identified Stanzas XLII and XLIII as the climax of the poem, the fact remains that no one before has ever traced a logical order of specific "foreseeable" incidents that lead to that climax, so that there is no objective way of knowing whether the dramatic structure was really "effective" for them or not (no one has, indeed, even commented as to whether it was

⁴Walter F. Wright, p. 164. (Lionel Stevenson, in his 1953 biography, The Ordeal of George Meredith, also speaks of the wife's death as the "tragic climax"--p. 105.)

⁵See, for example, Day Lewis, "Introduction," pp. viii and x; and Sassoon, pp. 48 and 50.

effective or not). I can perhaps best sum up this series of observations by stating my own experience with the poem. Even after I had read, with some care, the previous commentaries on Modern Love and had spent a number of months working with the poem itself, I was myself unable to see that the poem had a "true" dramatic structure. In fact, I prepared a dissertation plan suggesting that the whole structure was only what I called a "pseudo-dramatic" structure, and that its dramatic curves should be diagramed entirely with concave curves, as in the following:



In other words, I recognized Stanzas XLII and XLIII as recording the climax of the structure, but I recognized the climax, as it were, only after the fact. While I "felt" that the action rose mostly towards a climax, I could not logically "foresee" at any point that a climax was "about" to occur. And it was only after a great deal of closer analysis of the individual stanzas and then a resurvey of the whole that I was able to define, exactly, the sort of "true" dramatic structure that I have here defined.

Before attempting finally to evaluate a dramatic structure that, for over a hundred years, no one has very adequately described, I should like to look briefly once again at the difficulties which stand in the way of recognizing this structure. The first of these difficulties, as I suggested at the beginning of this section, is that amid the large number

of seemingly merely lyric stanzas or passages in the poem it is frequently difficult to determine what individual segments of action--what specific incidents--are taking place, if any incidents are taking place at all. One major cause for this difficulty, as we can see now from the preceding summary, is that much of the action is sexual in nature: a very great many of the specific events of the poem are "sexual events"--remembering here from my earlier discussion that I am speaking of "sexual events" not necessarily in terms of sexual consummations, but in the sense of those instances of significantly more sexual stimulation than usual and of significantly different awareness of stimulation.

Given that the poem was written to be published for a mid-Victorian reading public, we would expect Meredith to suggest these sexual events as subtly and delicately as possible. And indeed he seems to have been sufficiently concerned about the problem of the public taste to ask his friend Jessopp to obtain his wife's opinion. After receiving an apparent favorable reaction, he went on to ask:

Is she adapting her wisdom to the mind of the British matron, and of the snuffing moralist so powerful among us? . . . In the way of Art I never stop to consider what is admissible to the narrow minds of the drawing-room. But is it well to call up what is marked for oblivion? Isn't it a sort of challenge; and an unnecessary one?⁶

And yet, even despite Meredith's attempt to handle his subject with the utmost delicacy, The Spectator reviewer took him to task for "meddling

⁶Letters, I, 59 (The letter quoted here does not mention Modern Love by name, but it is dated at a time when Meredith was showing the poem to his friends to ask their opinions; and Stevenson, in The Ordeal of George Meredith, p. 105, suggests that the passage does apply to Modern Love. In any event, the passage certainly indicates Meredith's concern, in general, for not 'unnecessarily' offending the public taste).

causelessly, and somewhat pruriently, with a deep and painful subject," and even went so far as to suggest that a more accurate title for the poem would be "Modern Lust."⁷ Other contemporary reviewers appeared only slightly less offended.

We should be careful, however, not to place the whole reason for the delicacy of treatment at the door of Victorian "propriety." To a significant degree Meredith was not simply writing subtly about sexual matters; he was instead writing about sexual matters that were extremely subtle in themselves. Thus a present day poet, wishing to present his material clearly and accurately, might be expected to be somewhat more explicit in his depiction of the tryst in the woods between the husband and his Lady in XXXIX, and also to depict with somewhat more detail the husband's and wife's preparations for, and resumption of, marital relations in XLI and XLII; but in many another instance in the poem, the characters themselves do not immediately or consciously conceive of their situations as sexual, and Meredith has, through his "lyric" use of romantic or violent or cynical--but not immediately sexual--images, depicted both the conscious and, by indirection, the unconscious states of his characters with a high degree of accuracy--whereas a so-called "more explicit" treatment might in reality be less true to the situation. I am not sure indeed that many modern readers--who are used to having their sex presented very explicitly, if not sensationally, in modern fiction--are not less equipped than Meredith's first readers to recognize some of the sexual situations of the poem, however more tolerant the modern readers may be when they do recognize them.

⁷May 24, 1862, pp. 580-581.

We have, then, really two separate points: the action of Modern Love is difficult to discern, first, because the poet was attempting to deal in part with overt sexual incidents during a period of literature when the overt treatment of sex was frowned upon; and, second, because the poet was attempting in part to image truthfully and accurately subtle sexual incidents which have been difficult to discern, in life as well as in fiction, in any period. In both cases we may see that Meredith's seemingly merely lyric passages were functional and--given the difficulty of the problems, especially the second problem--highly successful.

The second major difficulty that stands in the way of recognizing the dramatic structure is, as I said before, that that structure is based on a set of psychological assumptions that have never been very clearly formulated and that are not widely recognized even in a general way. And here again I think that Meredith was being true to nature or experience, but again perhaps that we are not much better equipped than the Victorians were--at least as general readers--to recognize that he was.

For the following I do not have any scientific data to quote, but it seems to me that if a survey could be made, it might be discovered that the pattern of events in the breakup of the romantic love relationship which Meredith depicts in Modern Love is a quite common pattern in the breakup of actual love relationships that have had their genesis in strong romantic attractions (as opposed to financial, or other, expediency) and that, as a further qualification, have been permitted to follow their natural course beyond the governance of exterior social or religious pressures. That is, the couple have followed a pattern (1) of becoming dissatisfied and uneasy in their habitual relationship (sexual and emotional), which state is roughly contemporary with (2) one of the pair beginning a

flirtation with a third party, the combination of these two conditions leading to (3) a cessation of sexual relations between the original couple, followed by a rather long period of intense emotional conflict between the two during which the relationship remains stalemated (this period may involve a cessation of regular dating or a trial separation, but with the emotional ties, both of anger and love, remaining strong), this rather long period then followed by (4) the second of the two beginning a flirtation or affair of his own, this followed (usually rather quickly) by (5) a resumption of the original love relationship, including the sexual relationship, and this followed (again rather quickly) by (6) a final more decisive break between the two (a divorce or a final breakup).

If this fairly exact pattern should be found to exist in a significantly large number of cases of "modern" love relationships--as I believe it might (I should guess indeed that such a pattern is rather more common in modern--1860 to the present--life than the pattern of husbands murdering their unfaithful wives in the actual life of the medieval and early Renaissance periods)--then it would seem to follow inductively that a set of "predictable" cause-and-effect relationships exists between the various parts of this pattern. And if these relationships were to be studied, I believe that many of them would be found to be based on the kinds of psychological phenomena--the kinds of sentimental (or neurotic) fantasies concerning oneself and concerning the function of a love relationship which Meredith has imaged in Modern Love.

The conclusions here again are (1) that the difficulty in recognizing the dramatic structure of Modern Love lies in the nature of the material (in the fact that the material is modern and largely unexplored), and (2) that Meredith's frequent use of a seemingly lyric method of presentation

is highly functional in clarifying the material.

After all of this, however, the question still remains: is there anything to be said for a dramatic structure that does not make itself more or less fully apparent on a first reading or even perhaps fully apparent on repeated readings by various individuals for over a hundred years? Yes, if such a structure can be shown to exist at all, it is to a significant degree a measure of a work's "philosophical" coherence, and if the structure, both in part and in total pattern, can be shown to have a counterpart in common experience, it is then to a significant degree a measure of the work's philosophical and psychological "truth" or "validity."

Furthermore, I have, in all of this discussion, been talking about the existence and functioning of the dramatic structure in totally logical and conscious terms. To some extent (varying greatly in degree) I think that the structure may always have "worked" for individual readers on a partial and intuitive level. Its intuitive functioning is a part of the whole complex of phenomena which I have referred to in such terms as a "sense" of rising action or a "feeling" that the climax recorded in Stanzas XLII and XLIII is an outcome of the preceding action (without ever having consciously "added up" this previous action). I should say here that I understand "intuitive functioning" as a subconscious logical process that works both more rapidly and less exclusively than the conscious logical process.

Finally, it may be that future experience with the poem may be quite different from past experience--that we may become more and more used to examining love relationships both in life and in literature in terms of subtle changes in psychological conceptions of sexual situations, so that

future readers of the poem, even unaided by critical commentary about the poem per se, may be able to recognize much more readily its dramatic structure. To a large extent we are of course already used to applying subtle psychological examinations to literature, but the process still tends to be piecemeal; we do not expect to have to do so to a whole dramatic structure--the plays of Eugene O'Neill and Tennessee Williams, for example, demand for full appreciation of character subtle psychological examinations, but the subtle psychological materials tend to overlap in the whole structure with much better established dramatic archetypes--mythological and classical, and later Freudian, as well as regional and racial archetypes.

Meredith's dilemma as an artist was that in the process of being "psychologically" true to his material, he was forced to create (or more exactly to elucidate) an altogether new archetypal pattern at the same time that he attempted to put a specific fictional experience into a dramatic form based on that archetype.

In the preceding discussion I have demonstrated that, in the ultimate sense, Meredith did succeed in the second part of this artistic endeavor--that is, he did place his fictional experience in a true dramatic form, whatever difficulties that form may initially present to the reader. I have also attempted to show that in his frequently "lyric" presentation of material, he has gone much further in "elucidating" the "new" archetypal pattern (with its subtle psychological relationships) on which that form is based than we might expect a poet to go within the scope of a single fictional work.

In a letter to Jessopp some two years after the publication of Modern Love Meredith wrote:

As to the Poems: I don't think the age prosaic for not buying them. A man who hopes to be popular, must think from the mass, and as the heart of the mass. If he follows out vagaries of his brain, he cannot hope for general esteem; and he does smaller work. 'Modern Love' as a dissection of the sentimental passion of these days, could only be apprehended by the few who would read it many times. I have not looked for it to succeed. Why did I write it?—Who can account for pressure? . . .⁸

In the long perspective, I think that it must appear that Meredith, in following out "vagaries of his own brain," did much 'larger work' than he suggested to Jessopp.

The Contribution of Seasonal Imagery

Not directly related to the basic dramatic structure but reinforcing its effects at certain points is the seasonal imagery which Meredith employs in Modern Love. Although seasonal settings, per se, are directly identified or clearly implied in only eight of the fifty stanzas, a "sense" of seasonal atmosphere and of the passing of the seasons is much more pervasive throughout the poem.

The seasons directly identified, or more or less immediately recognizable, in Modern Love are Spring, in XI ("the honey of the Spring"; "The golden foot of May"); Spring or Summer, in XVIII (implied in the setting on the village "green," and in the husband's memory of "The May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease"); Winter, in XXIII ("Christmas weather") and in XXXV ("At Forfeits during snow"); Spring, in XXXVII ("So sweet up violet banks the Southern balm/ Breathes round") and in XXXIX (implied in the outdoor, nighttime setting); and Summer, in XLV ("These are the summer days") and in XLVII (implied in the pleasant twilight setting and in the phrase "We had not to look back on summer joys,/ Or forward to a

⁸Letters, I, 156.

summer of bright dye").

Although there are relatively few such stanzas in the poem, each of these stanzas--with the possible exception of XXXV--makes an especially strong seasonal statement, and each tends also to form the nucleus of a cluster of seasonal images--occurring for the most part metaphorically--in the immediately surrounding stanzas. Before detailing such occurrences, however, it may be expedient to outline what I consider to be the larger thematic uses to which Meredith puts these seasonal impressions.

The various seasons have of course certain symbolic values traditionally attached to them, Spring, for example, being usually thought of as the season of birth and youth, and Winter being thought of as the season of death. There are, however, possible alternatives in seasonal symbolism--thus, Summer, with the drying up and returning to dust of vegetation, may also be thought of as a season of death. Modern Love, with its Spring; Spring-Summer; Winter; Spring; and Summer pattern of seasons, obviously does not fit the simpler, and more usual, pattern of Spring; Summer; Autumn; and Winter. But, as I have shown in my discussion of the dramatic structure, the progression of the love relationship whose disintegration the poem chronicles also does not follow a simple curve of budding vitality through stability and then to lessening vitality and on into death. Instead it follows a complex pattern of dwindling vitality, dormancy, attempted rebirth (with various more or less false forms of renewed vitality), and then final blight and final loss of vitality. And it is this complex pattern which Meredith is able to reflect, at least in general terms, in his seasonal pattern of Spring; Spring-Summer; Winter; Spring; and Summer--by using both Winter and Summer as seasons of death.

As I shall demonstrate in the following pages, this general pattern of seasonal symbolism is reinforced and given specific application in a number of seasonal metaphors and seasonal image clusters throughout the poem.

In the first eighteen stanzas, the literal representations of seasonal settings indicate--as we have seen--that the actual time of year is Spring in XI, and perhaps Spring or Summer in XVIII. In symbolic terms, however, there is really no "springtime" period of love which falls within the objective time context of the poem--that is, the action of the poem begins at a point where the love relationship has already begun to disintegrate, where its vitality is already much weakened. In a more traditional use of seasonal symbolism, we might expect, in fact, the season of the year at which the action commences to be early Autumn.

Meredith, however, uses the Spring setting of these first stanzas for two purposes: first, and most obviously, to offset the fact that he has begun the action late in the disintegration of the whole love relationship--this, by the use of flashback techniques to indicate that the love was once vital and youthful; and second, and less obviously, perhaps to indicate that sentimental Love can thrive only under "springtime," or ideal conditions, and that when these ideal conditions are in any way impaired, even what seems to be springtime vitality itself turns poisonous. Thus, in Stanza II, where there is perhaps a hint of a springtime setting in the "languid humour" which "stole among the hours," the husband, reacting mainly in the immediate time context of the action, "[sickens] as at breath of poison-flowers." And again in IX, when he stands with his wife outdoors [as it seems] at "dusk," the pleasantness of the evening again indicating a springtime setting, he drinks from her eyes "as from a

poison-cup," and in a somewhat similar noxious image wishes that he might squeeze her "like an intoxicating grape."

In Stanza XI then, where the Spring setting is first made explicit, the truly vital and healthy springtime imagery--the "yellow meadows," the "honey of the Spring," the "showers of sweet notes," the "noon-dew," and the "golden foot of May . . . on the flowers"--is used to point up the husband's remembrance of their past experience, the springtime imagery in this case obviously symbolizing the Love relationship itself when it was not only idealized, but actually young and vital. As we may note here, the genuine vitality of the Spring imagery in XI perhaps carries over into the "dim rich skies" image in the next stanza.

And in Stanza XVIII, again the vitality of the actual seasonal setting--the "country merry-making on the green"--is used to point up the husband's remembrance of a time when he had felt more truly vital, when he had experienced "the May-fly pleasures of a mind at ease." In the immediate time context of the poem, he is, however, becoming too cynical really to believe in such vitality.

Other than these two types of uses of seasonal imagery in the first eighteen stanzas, we should perhaps note the seasonal images in two "philosophical" stanzas, IV and XIII, wherein, because of their strictly conceptual nature, there are no actual settings at all. In these stanzas, Meredith is perhaps able to image more nearly the present stage of the couple's love relationship--with the husband, in IV, conceiving of "Philosophy" as "cold as a mountain in its star-pitched tent," and of the "fire dying in the grate"; and again in XIII, conceiving of the "Seasons" passing, of the 'rose dying,' and of his own "stake" in Nature, which is "nothing more than dust."

After Stanza XVIII, having established the original vitality of the love relationship, and having suggested, as well, that even what is seemingly most vital in a sentimental Love relationship may itself turn poisonous, Meredith is able to move, at least for a number of stanzas, into a simpler and more traditional use of seasonal symbolism.

The next explicit seasonal setting that occurs is that of the "Christmas weather" in XXIII, but before considering that stanza, I should like to trace what is perhaps a very nebulous transition in seasonal imagery from XVIII to XXIII. Thus, to my mind, and this is certainly highly subjective, there is a slight hint of somnolent summer days in the image in XIX of the 'born idiot' who, "as days go by,/ Still rubs his hands before him, like a fly,/ In a queer sort of meditative mirth." Here at least there is an indication of the passing of time, and the methodical "fly" is perhaps a summer fly. And in XX, then, the husband finds "a wanton-scented tress/ In an old desk, dusty for lack of use."

After these slight hints at the passing of Summer, I get, in XXI--though again, I suppose, quite subjectively--a fairly strong sense of Autumn, the impression carried to some extent by the image of the "cedar-shadowed lawn," a cool image involving a wintry tree; and more definitely by the image of the "star" which "shakes" through the cedar limbs, in line 15, and by the "lost . . . hand," which "clings mortally," like a last leaf, in line 16.

In Stanza XXII, there are, I think, much more apparent suggestions of Autumn, the phrases "tossed irresolute," "shadow-like," "wavering pale," and "fall still as oak-leaves after frost" all working together--as I indicated in my explication of that stanza--to create an impression of occasional gusty winds, of darkening days, and of falling temperatures--

all of which prepare us for the actual "Christmas weather" of XXIII.

Stanza XXIII itself, with its "freezing darkness," its 'bleating lambs,' its 'small bird stiffening in the low starlight,' and its image of the husband "shuddering" as he sleeps, is one of those several stanzas which makes an extremely strong seasonal statement; and here, as I have suggested, the seasonal imagery is directly appropriate to the immediate action of the poem. The husband and wife are at this point clearly "freezing" one another emotionally, and their love relationship is forced into a state of dormancy.

After the very strong statement of the winter season in XXIII, Meredith does not make another explicit reference to seasonal weather until Stanza XXXV, when he again objectifies the winter setting in the phrase "At Forfeits during snow we played." In between, however, there is a reference in XXIV to the wife's "cruel lovely pallor," and also a reference to "a Season gone"--the season gone obviously being a season of vitality in contrast to the present season of dormancy. In similar metaphorical occurrences, the winter season is also imaged in Stanza XXX ("Then we stand wakened, shivering from our dream") and in XXXIV ("With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense").

Stanzas XXXIV and XXXV together mark perhaps the nadir in the husband and wife's 'freezing' of one another; and the momentary use of the past tense in the last few lines of XXXV—"At Forfeits during snow we played"--provides already something of a transition away from the winter setting. After only one intervening stanza, Stanza XXXVII then strongly establishes a new springtime setting, with its "garden terrace," its "purple valley . . . [glimmering] rich," its "smoky torch-flame," its "violet banks," and its "Southern balm."

The shift to a springtime setting in Stanza XXXVII obviously signals the beginning of a new phase in the seasonal symbolism of Modern Love; and here again I think we are faced with considerable complexity in Meredith's use of such symbolism. One "simple" function of the Spring setting at this point in the poem might be of course to reflect the burgeoning of the husband's romantic feeling for his blonde Lady--his "springtime" conception of her having already been imaged metaphorically in the phrase "Bloom-covered," back in Stanza XXXII--this at a time when he was still 'freezing' Madam, and at a time when we must suppose that the actual setting was still Winter. For the husband's later tryst in the woods with My Lady--ironically interrupted by the appearance of Madam with her friend--Meredith provides of course the idyllic nighttime setting of Stanza XXXIX, which we may certainly take as a springtime setting.

The husband's affair with his blonde Lady is not, however, the central action of the poem; and much more significant functions for the springtime setting may be found, I think, directly in the husband's relationship with his wife. As I indicated previously, the pattern of progression of the basic love relationship of the poem is that of dwindling vitality, dormancy, attempted rebirth, and then final blight and final loss of vitality. In terms of action, then, the springtime setting of Stanzas XXXVII and following "appropriately" reflect the attempt at rebirth of the couple's old love relationship in these stanzas. Thematically, however, it is "ironically appropriate" that this attempt should fail in the midst of a springtime setting. Sentimental Love, according to Meredith, may be a thing of the "Seasons" (see discussion of XIII, pp. 93-96), but mature love should be able to weather the cyclic changes

of Nature. Thus, as Meredith writes in the Hymn to Colour: "Dead seasons quicken in one petal-spot/ Of colour unforget" (p. 364).

In this case, however, the sentimental Love is so devitalized by the necessary cyclic changes of Nature that it is unable to survive the storms of its own most congenial season. Not the "ripe flame upon the bough" [not the balanced impulse of Blood, Brain, and Spirit]--as the husband says in XLI--it fails specifically to survive the stormy ocean-shore weather of Stanza XLIII: "'Tis morning: but no morning can restore/ What we have forfeited." Morning, like Spring, is traditionally a time of rebirth, so that I think we may take this stanza too as having, for symbolic purposes, a Spring setting, though there are no "objective" evidences of the time of year within the stanza itself.

Having passed the climactic action, the final "blighting," of the central love relationship, as recorded in Stanzas XLII and XLIII, the poem moves now into what is obviously a summer setting, as illustrated by both literal and metaphorical language. Thus, in XLIV the "purple doors . . . [close] behind" on the symbolic "springtime" of the husband's sentimental Love for his wife--she who had "breathed the violet breath of maidenhood/ Against [his] kisses once" (XLI); and in XLV, in the objectified summer setting ("These are our summer days, and these our walks"), the husband looks back also on his sentimental attraction to My Lady--and, although the literal setting is still "the season of the sweet wild rose," he 'plucks' the rose, and then sees his wife "crush it under heel," thus symbolically closing that sentimental season too.

In Stanza XLVI, then, in the 'dumbness,' the 'closeness,' the 'vacancy,' the "hum of loneliness," and the "disordered" state of the husband's perceptions, we have perhaps some suggestion of a muggy, torpid summer

atmosphere--with the summer setting again made more or less explicit in Stanza XLVII ("We had not to look back on summer joys,/ Or forward to a summer of bright dye"), although in XLVII the late evening hour renders the summer atmosphere pleasant and revivifying.

This revivification comes too late for the wife, however, and in XLIX, the husband finds her by the seashore, walking "shadow-like and dry"; and in L gets the final "dusty answer" for "the soul/ When hot for certainties in this our life!"

Meredith's use of Summer symbolism to reflect the final death of the love relationship is, I think, particularly appropriate, for in the use of Winter symbolism, even with its connotation of harsh freezing, there is yet some connotation of seeds surviving in the earth, whereas in the use of Summer symbolism, the returning to dust of living things has less connotation of possible revival.

In this detailing of the seasonal imagery in Modern Love, I have attempted to demonstrate that the various seasonal statements not only reinforce the immediate emotions of the protagonists in the stanzas in which they occur but also that the whole rather unusual pattern of Spring; Spring-Summer; Winter; Spring; and Summer alternations of the seasons at least roughly parallels and reinforces the several turnings of the peculiar dramatic structure which Meredith created for the poem. Like the dramatic structure, the seasonal pattern is subtle and occasionally misleading but I think ultimately logical in artistic terms.

The Contribution of Shifts in Point of View

Much more significant than the treatment of seasonal imagery in Modern Love is Meredith's handling of the technical devices of point of view in the poem. Although this aspect of the work has as yet received almost no detailed attention, something of the complexity and peculiarity of the point of view may be suggested by the following passage from Friedman's "The Jangled Harp" (p. 12):

A "sonnet"-sequence with a difference, this poem presents its action through a bizarre mixture of techniques. Although there is a plot, it is not presented directly as such. . . . It is neither told by means of narration nor shown by means of dialogue. There is an omniscient narrator who speaks in I-IX and XLIX-L, and there is an occasional moment of actual dialogue (e.g., IX, XXV), but most of the poem (X-XLVIII) is spoken by the husband as both protagonist and commentator. Although he sometimes narrates directly and comments upon the action (e.g., XVII, XXI, XXXIV), most of the time he is shown responding privately, either just before or just after a scene, by means of interior monologues in which he laments his situation, displays his feelings, reflects upon and interprets his wife's actions, makes decisions, and so on. On several occasions he apparently speaks directly to Madam or his Lady (e.g., XI, XIV, XXIV, XXVII, XXVIII), but even there he seems to be doing so only in his mind. Thus most of the poem is taken up with his internal responses to various stimuli stated or implied within each speech, and is therefore "lyric" in technique although dramatic in form.

Meredith's techniques may seem even more of a "bizarre mixture" if we note (as I have done in my stanza-by-stanza analysis of the poem) that the omniscient narrator passages of Stanzas I-IX are themselves frequently interspersed with passages of interior monologue (III, 2-16; VI, 6-14; VII, 3-16; IX, 13-16), and also that approximately half of Stanza IV (lines 11-16) is given over to authorial comment or philosophizing—which comment, being couched in the first person plural, present tense, is in no way technically distinguishable from other passages of philosophical comment in those sections of the poem in which the husband is clearly the

narrator. It may also be questioned whether Stanza VII contains any omniscient narration at all since lines 1 and 2 ("She issues radiant from her dressing-room,/ Like one prepared to scale and upper sphere")--the only lines of direct narration in the stanza--are presented in the present tense whereas all other passages of direct omniscient narration in the poem utilize the past tense. Here we should further note that while the present tense does very largely predominate in the first-person, or husband, sections of the narration, scattered instances of first person, past tense narration do occur throughout the middle sections of the poem (e.g., XVI, 1-15; XXIII, 9, 14-16; XXXV, 13-15; XLVI, 2-16; XLVII; XLVIII, 5-8)--such instances tending to recall by analogy the opening omniscient narrator, past tense stanzas and tending as well to prepare for the closing omniscient narrator stanzas. From all of these additional observations, we may see then that the mixture of "lyric" technique and dramatic form in Modern Love is even more all-pervasive than Friedman's admirable but brief summary is able to suggest.

The key to Meredith's treatment of point of view in Modern Love lies in the very complex shift in Stanza III wherein the omniscient narrator of the first two stanzas--betrayed by the mere thought of the other man of the poem into an exclamation of scorn--is thus implicitly identified with the husband of the poem. As I explained at considerable length in my detailed analysis of that stanza (see pp. 66-68), this shift involves not only (1) an identification of the omniscient narrator with the husband narrator, but also (2) a shift from past tense narration--from the vantage point of some unspecified time beyond the action of the poem--to interior monologue, present tense exclamation--but still in a time context beyond the action, and (3) a shift within the interior monologue from a "general"

memory and emotional reaction to the "thought" of the other man, to specific memories of the wife's gaze irradiating the other man and of the wife's gaze irradiating himself, and hence to a coherent "reliving" of the experience from a specific moment during the time when he was first aware of the wife's attraction to the other man. The net effect of this whole transition, then, is to make it appear as though the speaker from the very beginning of the poem were the husband--speaking from a vantage point in time beyond the action of the poem, and attempting to "remember" and record his experience "objectively," that is, in the third person and in the past tense, but instead being caught up by the intensity of his memories and forced emotionally and conceptually to "relive" his experience. Such a transition also makes the shifts in point of view a dramatic function in themselves, one which involves a conflict between the forces of balance and acceptance of past experience and the forces, perhaps, which demand that the past be made over to fit more nearly the desires of the wounded and egoistic personality.

It may be noted that in my stanza-by-stanza analysis, I used the term "objective narrator" to designate the speaker of the first two stanzas, whereas here thus far I have adopted Friedman's term "omniscient narrator." Neither term, however, is a totally adequate designation. Although the speaker of the first stanzas shows some insight into the wife's mind, as well as into the husband's, the perception, as concerns the wife, is almost entirely of "general" states of mind--states of mind obviously inherent in the dramatic situation itself. Thus, in the last lines of Stanza I, the speaker describes the husband and the wife as "looking through their dead black years," and also describes "Each" as "wishing for the sword that severs all." Such insights into the wife's

"general" states of mind should, of course, be available to a husband who had lived through the experience described in the poem with her, this without "omniscient" powers; and indeed from time to time in the middle of the poem, the husband, speaking in the first person and present tense (that is, in the immediate time context of the action) shows much more specific insight into the wife's thoughts and feelings than is shown here (see, for examples, Stanza XXII and XXXV). Otherwise it should be noted that from the very beginning of the poem, the action seems to be observed or "remembered" as it has impinged directly on the senses and emotions of the husband:

By this he knew she wept with waking eyes:
That, at his hand's light quiver by her head,
 The strange low sobs that shook their common bed
 Were called into her with a sharp surprise,
 And strangled mute, like little gaping snakes,
Dreadfully venomous to him.

(I, 1-6)

Also, although the speaker of the first stanzas is manifestly trying to be "objective"--to the extent, in fact, of speaking in the third person about the action--even in these stanzas the quality of the imagery is highly impressionistic, and the tone of the writing is almost entirely lyric. In line 5 of Stanza II, indeed, the speaker seems directly to exclaim the emotion of the husband, the line differing from the interior monologue exclamations of other parts of the poem only in the past tense of the verb at the end of the line: "But, oh, the bitter taste her beauty had!" And Stanza II ends in a very intense imaging of the husband's emotions:

and then again
 He fainted on his vengefulness, and strove
 To ape the magnanimity of love,
 And smote himself, a shuddering heap of pain.

We are, then, subtly prepared even in these first two stanzas for the abrupt outbreak of directly expressed emotion and the loss of technical "objectivity" in Stanza III.

In Stanza IV, the technical point of view shifts back to objective narration--the husband regaining his "objectivity" as it were--but again the objective narration emanates from a single intelligence (rather than from a roving or omniscient intelligence) and again the authorial comments interspersing the narration tend to reflect the protagonist's moods at the time of the action.

Stanza V then continues the third person, past tense narration; but in Stanza VI, as in Stanza III, the point of view again shades almost imperceptibly into interior monologue, the stanza beginning with objective narration in the past tense, then shifting to what seems to be a present tense authorial comment by the objective narrator but more or less obviously tinged with the protagonist's emotions (lines 3-5), and then continuing the argument in what emerges as an interior monologue in the mind of the husband at the time of the action (lines 6 and following). In the last two lines of Stanza VI, the point of view then shifts back to past tense, objective narration; but Stanza VII is present tense narration and interior monologue throughout, with the first two lines of VII indeterminable third person or first person narration, but couched, as the rest of the stanza, in the present tense.

The first two lines of Stanza VIII are then also indeterminable third person or first person narration, but here couched in the past tense, the point of view in the rest of the stanza shifting again to first person, present tense interior monologue. And, finally, Stanza IX resumes the third person, past tense narration, but again abruptly shifts to interior monologue

in line 13--the interior monologue again appearing as a strong outburst of emotion. From that point onward through Stanzas X-XLV inclusive, the point of view is first person, present tense narration, interspersed by interior monologue, a few snatches of dialogue, and some first person, past tense narration in the form of flashbacks--the speaker having apparently failed for the time in his attempt to keep his experience in an "objective" third person and past tense perspective, and having been instead caught up by his experience, and forced to "relive" it--as it were.

This whole process of a speaker attempting to record his past experience objectively and then being caught up by it and forced to "relive" it emotionally might suggest an analogy with Meredith himself, in the literal process of writing Modern Love, being caught up from time to time by his own emotion in remembering his unhappy first marriage to Mary Ellen Nicolls. Wholly aside from questions of actual autobiographical content, however, such an analogy is for most purposes obviously a false one--one does not write formal and extremely complex poetry in raw exclamations of emotion; and the point of view in Modern Love is itself surely an intricately ordered fictional device--however it might conceivably have been suggested to Meredith by his own occasional emotional reactions while creating the poem.

What the complex treatment of point of view provides for Modern Love is, in fact, a kind of psychological "frame drama" within which the immediate dramatic action of the poem takes place. And the dramatic tension of this frame drama in the first nine stanzas of the poem, the "sense" of being caught up and forced more and more into direct and intense expressions of emotion, directly parallels and reinforces the "sense" of rising action, of growing tension, in the immediate dramatic relationship between the husband and wife, also as felt in the first nine stanzas of the poem.

An equally effective paralleling of the dramatic tension of the frame drama and the dramatic tension of the basic dramatic structure occurs, I believe, in the five stanzas which conclude the poem. In those stanzas the shifts in point of view are perhaps less involved but I think equally subtle. Thus, in Stanza XLVI, the meeting in the woods between the husband and wife when they attempt to resolve their distrust of one another is given a sense of resolution and finality by the shift from present tense to past tense in line 2. As I indicated in my analysis of that stanza, the solemn dignity and gravity of the meeting is further enhanced by the religious images of "communion" and "Matin-bell," by the Biblical ring of "It befell" and "lo!" and by the archaic tone of the verb forms "did guide" and "did . . . see"--these elements tending to disguise, but at the same time to reinforce the effect of, the shift to the past tense.

In the great Stanza XLVII, then, in the solemn calm of the evening, when the husband walks with his wife near the osier-isle, the use of the past tense is continued. Very significantly in these two stanzas, I think, the shift to the past tense is accompanied by no immediate shift to the third person--the technical treatment of point of view here thus suggesting that the husband-protagonist himself, within the immediate time context of the poem, has come to terms with his experience, at the same time that the husband-speaker of the whole poem has come to terms with the emotional problem of relating the experience and has been able to return it to its true past tense perspective. Stanza XLVII, as I have indicated before, is the philosophical climax of the poem, and in terms of action it is the point at which the husband-protagonist does actually come to terms with his experience.

In Stanza XLVIII then, in which the fatal element of distrust between

the husband and wife is again briefly imaged, the point of view again shifts in the first five lines to present tense and, with the exception of a few peculiar elements of past tense narration in the middle of the stanza, remains present tense throughout.

The brief shift back to present tense in XLVIII allows then a new shift in perspective into past tense in Stanza XLIX, the stanza which will record the catastrophe. The feeling created by this shift, even in the first few lines of the stanza, is that what has happened between the husband and wife has irrevocably happened, rather than being a function of the still suspenseful present. And this particular effect is further enhanced by an accompanying shift to third person narration, here utilized for the first time since Stanza IX. This shift to the third person represents, in fact, a shift from lyric involvement to objective tragic vision: the husband-narrator—who had attempted to view his past objectively at the beginning of the poem but had instead been caught up and forced to relive his experience—has now passed through the conflict of his passion and regained (or perhaps, in a sense, re-achieved) his tragic perspective. Thus, in the concluding stanzas of the poem, the release of dramatic tension in the frame drama provided by the point of view directly parallels and reinforces the "falling action" of the basic dramatic structure, just as the two structures had paralleled one another at the beginning of the poem.

Before leaving this discussion of point of view, we should perhaps consider the significance of the two basic choices of point of view in Modern Love each in its own right, and not simply as they work together to create a dramatic tension and pattern—that is, the choice of first person, present tense narration or interior monologue for the great bulk of the presentation, and the choice of third person, past tense narration for the initial and concluding presentation.

The significance of the third person, past tense point of view for the beginning and concluding presentation is, I think, fairly easy to determine and has been partly suggested already. First, it gives a sense of "objective" truth to the whole narrative and provides a frame of reference by which to judge the husband-protagonist's perhaps more naive point of view as it operates from within the immediate time context of the action. Second, there is, I believe, a certain dignity inherent in third person, past tense narration which contributes--as I have suggested above--a "tragic perspective" to the closing narration and commentary on the poem. Thus, in tragic drama itself a final epitaph is usually spoken by a "third person"--either by a chorus or by a surviving character. At first consideration, that a "third person" does speak the epitaph may seem simply a manifest necessity, since the tragic hero himself usually does not "survive" to speak his own epitaph, but such a consideration overlooks the fact that the need is felt for an epitaph to be spoken at all--and the fact that such a "third person" epitaph is indeed frequently requested by the tragic hero himself while he does still survive: e.g., in Hamlet's "Absent thee from felicity a while,/ And in this harsh world draw thy breath in pain,/ To tell my story," and in Othello's "When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,/ Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate,/ Nor set down aught in malice." Othello, in fact, continues for a time to tell his own story, and does so in the third person, past tense: "then must you speak of one that loved not wisely but too well;/ Of one" It is indeed as though the tragic hero were himself attempting to achieve an "objective" point of view and thus to comprehend and rise above his tragedy--such comprehension again being a form of recognition in the Aristotelian sense. So peculiar is Meredith's treatment of point of view in Modern Love that the husband is allowed, in a much more direct sense,

to tell his own story, in the third person, past tense, in XLIX, and to become his own tragic chorus in L.

The significance of the first person, present tense or interior monologue presentation for the great bulk of the poem, I have again partly suggested already, this in my analysis of Stanza XXII when I pointed out, in a footnote, that the acute insight into the wife's nature, expressed in that stanza, is expressed by the husband in the present tense of the action and not simply by an "omniscient" narrator. In numerous other cases, such acute perceptions are also made the function of the husband's psyche and not simply, or possibly, the function of an omniscient narrator. Similarly the philosophical comment on the action at almost all points in the poem is made a function of the husband's intelligence in the present tense of the action. Beyond both of these values, however--which might conceivably have been achieved by other modes of narration--the first person, present tense point of view makes almost the whole symbolic image structure of the poem a function of the husband's psyche within the present tense of the action, whether he is "consciously" aware of the significance of the image symbols or not. And as should be clear from my stanza-by-stanza explication and from my treatment of the dramatic form, almost the entire psychological significance of Modern Love is carried by such image symbols, and by the husband's varying degrees of awareness as he uses them. The basic dramatic structure of the poem, then, which is based on subtle psychological turnings, is not only reinforced by the parallel structure provided by shifts in point of view, but is directly dependent, in its very nature, on the use of the first person, present tense presentation in the great bulk of the poem.

CHAPTER V

AN ANALYSIS OF THE STANZA FORM

In the early commentaries on the poem, it was customary to speak of the individual stanzas of Modern Love as sonnets, although there was also much discussion as to whether that term was correctly applied to a sixteen line form. Friedman referred to the individual sections simply as stanzas, and I have followed the same procedure in my own discussion. It remains true, however, that the Modern Love stanzas, with their iambic pentameter lines and quatrain units, do have some structural similarity to the sonnet form, as well as an internal unity of thought and conceit which is reminiscent of the sonnet; and it is also true that Meredith himself referred to the stanzas as sonnets, both in a letter to his friend Maxse¹ and in Stanza XXX of the poem itself. We might ask then why Meredith, who elsewhere showed himself adept at the traditional sonnet forms,² should have chosen the sixteen line form that he did for Modern Love, or to put the question in more answerable form, we might ask what advantages, in terms of ease of handling and of artistic effectiveness,

¹Letters, I, 60.

²Scattered throughout The Poetical Works are forty-eight fourteen line sonnets, thirty-three in the Italian form (pp. 181-190, 368, 369, 421, 432-434, 456, 458, 568, and 570); three, including appropriately two called "The Spirit of Shakespeare," in the Shakespearean form (pp. 184 and 571); and twelve in various combinations of the two (pp. 10, 81-83, 133, 170, and 410).

accrue to the sixteen line form as opposed to the fourteen line forms.

One obvious advantage of the sixteen line stanza is of course simply that the addition of the two extra lines allows a slightly greater extension of thought or narrative development within the individual stanza than does a fourteen line form. Also it is readily apparent that the Meredith rime scheme--abbacddceffeghhg--is less demanding in terms of the difficulty of finding rimes (and is thereby more flexible in diction) than is the Italian sonnet form which it partly resembles in its use of an enclosed couplet quatrain form (abba) as opposed to the alternating rime scheme (abab) of the Shakespearean quatrain. Here it should be noted that the enclosed couplet quatrain does offer some slight element of surprise not found in the merely alternating rimes of the Shakespearean quatrain, in that its last line rimes somewhat unexpectedly with the partly forgotten first line across the bridge of the enclosed couplet. Otherwise the Meredith stanza, in its use of quatrain units rather than the larger octet and sestet units of the Italian sonnet does more closely resemble the Shakespearean sonnet.

To return to the question of the sixteen line form as opposed to the fourteen line form, the great advantage of the sixteen line form is that it allows Meredith to avoid the sense of completion which is inherent in both of the orthodox fourteen line forms, and would indeed be difficult to avoid in any fourteen line form more complex than a series of rimed couplets. This "advantage" which the sixteen line form has over either of the fourteen line forms is of course an advantage only as concerns the needs of a more or less continuous narrative. Very frequently in the Modern Love stanzas Meredith employs what might be called a one-line comment, a final line which does not so much sum up the preceding matter as offer a

glancing and usually ironic insight into its meaning. The final line in the Meredith form is of course structurally set off by the preceding couplet and is given emphasis by the slight surprise of its rhyming with the third line above. Such a one-line comment, however pointed it may be, lacks the weight to balance the rest of the stanza, and one consequently expects a continuation of the poem. Two examples typifying something of the range of this effect may be seen in Stanzas XVI and XXXIV, from each of which respectively I will quote the last eight lines:

Well knew we that Life's greatest treasure lay
 With us, and of it was our talk. 'Ah, yes!
 Love dies!' I said: I never thought it less.
 She yearned to me that sentence to unsay.
 Then when the fire domed blackening, I found
 Her cheek was salt against my kiss, and swift
 Up the sharp scale of sobs her breast did lift:--
 Now am I haunted by that taste! that sound!

By stealth
 Our eyes dart scrutinizing snakes. She's glad
 I'm happy, says her quivering under-lip.
 'And are not you?' 'How can I be?' 'Take ship!
 For happiness is somewhere to be had,'
 'Nowhere for me!' Her voice is barely heard.
 I am not melted, and make no pretence.
 With commonplace I freeze her, tongue and sense.
 Niagara or Vesuvius is deferred.

As is the case in these examples, in twenty-one of the fifty stanzas the last line is set off from the preceding material by either a semicolon, a colon, or a period.³ In three other stanzas a full stop occurs within the last line,⁴ and in four other stanzas a full stop occurs within the next to the last line.⁵ And indeed in a large number of the remaining twenty-two

³Stanzas I, III, IV, XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII, XXI, XXIII, XXIV, XXV, XXX, XXXIV, XXXV, XXXVII, XXXVIII, XXXIX, XLIII, XLV, XLVIII, and XLIX.

⁴Stanzas XXXI, XXXIII, and XXXVI.

⁵Stanzas XXVII, XXIX, XXXII, and XLI.

stanzas a similar effect is achieved through the use of periodic sentence structures with an ironic turn of phrasing occurring in the last line.⁶

Here it should be significantly noted that when the organic structure of the poem demands a more stately or final ending to a particular stanza, Meredith achieves the desired effect by the use of additional sound devices, as is the case in the concluding lines of the famous 47th stanza, which is the philosophical climax of the poem, and which tends to stand alone as a kind of resting-place before the final catastrophe:

Love, that had robbed us of immortal things,
 This little moment mercifully gave,
 w s s w w
 Where I have seen across the twilight wave.
 sw s w w
 The swan sail with her young beneath her wings.

Here the syntactical unity of the last two lines is reinforced by the internal half-rime of seen and wings, itself reinforced by the assonance with beneath; and by the w alliteration of wave and wings, which is in turn emphasized by the w repetitions elsewhere in the lines. Also contributing to the unity and force of these two lines are the internal half-rime of have and wave, the assonance of twi and light, and the alliteration of seen, swan, and sail.

And in the concluding stanza of the poem, without varying the basic rime scheme of the stanza, Meredith achieves the final weight of completion for the whole poem by strong half-rime in all four of the last lines:

 r r r r
 In tragic hints here see what evermore
 r r r
Moves dark as yonder midnight ocean's force,

⁶See for examples Stanzas II, VI, IX, XI, XIV, XX, XXII, XXVI, and XL.

^r ^r ^r ^r ^r
Thundering like ramping hosts of warrior horse,
^r ^r
 To throw that faint thin line upon the shore!

In this case the near-rime of more, force, horse, and shore emphasizes the thematic and syntactic unity of the last four lines very strongly, and this unity is further reinforced by the dark r sounds which reverberate throughout the lines. Other elements of unity in these lines are the internal near-rimes of hints and thin and yonder and thundering, and the h, m, n, and th repetitions throughout the lines.

As we have seen, then, Meredith used the proclivity toward incompleteness inherent in the enclosed-couplet-sixteen-line form to strong advantage throughout most of the poem, and skillfully modified its effect by additional techniques at the key points where the organic structure of the work demanded a sense of completion. In the sixteen line stanza, which he apparently deliberately chose over the traditional sonnet forms, since he called the stanzas sonnets, and which he did not use elsewhere, Meredith thus found for Modern Love a consistent formal structure which would be flexible in organic application and, at the same time, unobtrusive in its artistic effectiveness.

CHAPTER VI

THE LITERARY MERITS AND THE HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF MODERN LOVE

The rank of Modern Love among Meredith's own poems is well established. In one phrase or another, Elmer James Bailey, Cavazza, Chambers, Curle, Friedman, Hough, Walter Jerrold, Le Gallienne, Harriet Monroe, Robert Peel, Symons, Trevelyan, Hugh Walker, and Cornelius Weygandt all explicitly designate for Modern Love a primary position among Meredith's poetical works;¹ and the great majority of other Meredith critics indicate as much by the quantity and quality of their comments on this particular work.² With the one exception of Lucifer in Starlight, Modern Love is also, either in part or whole, Meredith's most frequently anthologized poem, appearing

¹E. J. Bailey, "A Note on Mr. Meredith's 'Modern Love'," The Forum, September, 1908, p. 248; Cavazza, p. IV; Chambers, p. 72; Curle, p. 394; Friedman, "The Jangled Harp," p. 10; Hough, p. 3; Jerrold, George Meredith: An Essay towards Appreciation (London, 1902), p. 46; Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics, p. 112; Monroe, "Meredith as a Poet," Poetry, XXXII (1928), p. 210; Peel, "The Creed of a Victorian Pagan" (Harvard Honors Theses in English No. 4, Cambridge, Mass., 1931), p. 31; Symons, "George Meredith's Poetry," Westminster Review, September, 1887, p. 695; Trevelyan, Poetry and Philosophy, p. 35; Walker, The Literature of the Victorian Era (Cambridge, 1910), p. 781; and Weygandt, "George Meredith," The Time of Tennyson: English Victorian Poetry as it Affected America (New York and London, 1936), pp. 181 and 188.

²Phrases such as "masterpiece," "great work," "one of his best works," and "greater than [such and such compared work]" occur frequently in commentaries other than the ones I have listed.

more often, at least in part, than the graceful and much shorter Love in the Valley.

In an absolute sense, too, the brilliance of Modern Love has been much extolled. Aside from the original reviewers, most of whom took offense merely at the subject matter of the poem, those critics who have considered Modern Love at all have, almost to the man,³ drawn upon superlatives in their commentaries. Those elements of the poem most frequently praised fall roughly into three categories: (1) the variety of its interest, mood, and emotion; (2) the complexity and depth of its psychological insight; and (3) the imaginative power and vividness of its metaphors and its pictorial imagery.

As illustrations of the first category of praise, moving from earlier commentators to later ones, Swinburne (in his letter to The Spectator) speaks of "passionate and various beauty"; Sir William Watson, of a "complexity of emotions which chase and cross one another, and of passions which interact and intervolve"; and Symons, of a "double-mindedness more constant than that of Heine."⁴ Trevelyan speaks of "psychology, comedy, tragedy, irony, philosophy, and beauty [which] follow upon each other's heels in such quick succession, that scarcely except by a certain greater

³The only two critics, beyond the original reviewers, who have, to my knowledge, derogated the poem are Andrew Lang, History of English Literature from "Beowulf" to Swinburne (London, 1912), pp. 595-596, and Sir Arthur Thomas Quiller-Couch, "The Poetry of George Meredith," Cambridge Lectures (London and New York, 1943), p. 259, both of whose notices are very brief and who, respectively, object only to its obscurity and its unpleasant subject matter--much the same objections as those voiced by the original reviewers.

⁴Swinburne, p. 100; Watson, "Mr. Meredith's Poetry," Excursions in Criticism (London, 1893), p. 138; and Symons "George Meredith as Poet," p. 49.

master, has a single tune been played upon so many stops"; and J. B. Priestley speaks of an "extraordinary range . . . from which may be extracted examples of almost any kind of poetry," and still later of a "range . . . [in] this one poem [which] is clearly beyond that of all but the three or four greatest poets in our literature."⁵ Peel speaks of the poem as running a "gamut from tragic beauty to cynical wit, from subtle analysis to haunting imagery"; and Day Lewis, of a "variety of . . . poetic accomplishment"; of "skillful alterations of crisis with calm, tragic necessity with lyrical illusion, cynicism or despair with faith and tenderness"; and of an "emotional gamut" which is "truly remarkable."⁶ Friedman speaks of "grating ironies, giddily reversing emotions, rapidly shifting images, and subtly blended techniques"; and Elizabeth C. Wright speaks of a "complexity of image convolutions" which is "almost unbelievable," and of "ironies struck off like sparks from the constant juxtaposition of opposites."⁷ Finally, Hough speaks of "rapid alterations of love and hate, tenderness and cynicism, understanding and blind resentment"; of a "continual conflict of wit and deep feeling"; and of a "style [which] is flashing, brilliant, and varied."⁸

Although the variety of Modern Love can scarcely be overstated, surely the above descriptions sufficiently emphasize the point. We should note, however, that, as Hough and a number of the other critics suggest,

⁵Trevelyan, Poetry and Philosophy, p. 19; and Priestley, George Meredith (English Men of Letters Series, London and New York, 1926), p. 92.

⁶Peel, p. 31; and Day Lewis, "Introduction," pp. vii, x, and xxiii.

⁷Friedman, "The Jangled Harp," p. 10; and Elizabeth C. Wright, p. 1.

⁸Hough, p. 9.

the variety in interest, mood, and emotion--that is, the variety in content--in Modern Love is matched by an equal variety in style and technique. As Friedman states, the "poem presents its action through a bizarre mixture of techniques,"⁹ of which the frequent shifts in point of view and the predominate use of first person commentary and of interior monologue, resulting in "lyric" expression within an essentially dramatic form, are the most obvious examples. But, as I have demonstrated in my section on point of view, these frequent shifts are carefully patterned to reveal immediate shifts in the husband's emotions and in his mental conceptions and all of these shifts are also skillfully related to the total dramatic structure.

In addition, as Hough points out, "as we approach the final peripeteia, the reconciliation that is no reconciliation, the flash of alternating moods disappears, the tone becomes more uniform." As Hough further states, "There are few poems in the nineteenth century and perhaps none in our own that have the sharp undistorted poignancy of the climactic pieces in 'Modern Love'. . . . It is appropriate to speak of [Stanzas XLIII, XLVII, and XLIX among these] no longer as poignant or pathetic, but as tragic."¹⁰ The remarkable variety of Modern Love is, then, subordinated to its total artistic form, enriching that form without distorting it.

Closely allied to the variety of interest, mood, and emotion in the poem is its complexity and depth of psychological insight. As may be remembered from an earlier quotation, Meredith himself, in a letter to

⁹Friedman, "The Jangled Harp," p. 12.

¹⁰Hough, p. 10.

Jessopp, spoke of Modern Love as a "dissection of the sentimental passion of these days";¹¹ and E. K. Chambers, writing in 1897, speaks of the poem as "the history of two souls, laid bare with a psychological scalpel, painfully, but in infinite pity."¹² Meredith's Letters were not published until 1912, and Chamber's essay, not until 1942, but the same basic metaphor occurs in a statement by Arthur Symons, published in 1901, where Symons states that

Modern Love . . . remains Mr. Meredith's masterpiece in poetry, and it will always remain, beside certain things of Donne and of Browning, an astonishing feat in the vivisection of the heart in verse.¹³

Later critics tend to praise the poem's psychological insight in more modern, but perhaps less striking, terms. Trevelyan speaks of "harrowing psychological detail"; Priestley speaks of both Modern Love and The Sage Enamoured and the Honest Lady as "subtle narratives or psychological studies"; and Day Lewis speaks of Meredith's quite extraordinary psychological insight," and states that "the dramatic shape of the poem, no less than its emotional sources, has a profound psychological interest."¹⁴ Harriet Monroe, writing in 1928, calls Modern Love a "masterpiece, antedating Freud and the other psychologists by a half-century," and one which is "yet intensely modern, a searching study of modern agonies of perishing love in marriage."¹⁵ And Hough, in his introduction to the 1962 edition

¹¹Letters, I, 156 [Italics in this and the following two quotations are mine].

¹²Chambers, p. 74.

¹³Symons, "George Meredith as Poet," p. 49.

¹⁴Trevelyan, Poetry and Philosophy, p. 20; Priestley, p. 109; and Day Lewis, "Introduction," pp. x and xix.

¹⁵Monroe, p. 216.

of Meredith's Selected Poems, repeatedly calls attention to the "power of psychological analysis" and the psychological "modernity" of the poem.¹⁶

A great portion of my own study has, of course, been concerned with analysing the psychological conceptions on which the dramatic action of Modern Love turns; and I have demonstrated not only that Meredith's treatment of character and of action is psychologically acute in a fragmentary way, but that the dramatic structure of the work as a whole is based on a total organic psychological theory whose various dynamics are themselves readily apprehendable in modern psychological terms.

I believe, indeed, that in order to find any really adequate comparison for the detail, the concentration, the organic unity, and the modern viability of the psychological observation in Modern Love in nineteenth century literature, one must go outside the realm of verse entirely and consider such a work as Dostoyevsky's Notes from Underground, written in 1864--a work, it might be noted, almost exactly contemporary with Modern Love. The comparison to Dostoyevsky's Notes is of course an awkward one--the sheer bulk of psychological detail in Notes from Underground is obviously much greater than that in Modern Love, and the two also differ very significantly in modes of presentation. Although both employ basically a first person point of view, Dostoyevsky's first person narration is discursive, self-conscious, and almost exclusively self-analytical throughout, whereas Meredith's semi-dramatic, semi-lyric interior monologue technique is almost always concentrated and metaphoric in its evocation of rapidly shifting and immediate interpersonal conflicts. Despite the dissimilarities, however, such a comparison does seem to me

¹⁶Hough, pp. 1, 5, 6, and 9.

much more apt than a comparison would be, for example, to one of Meredith's own much acclaimed "psychological" novels. Just as Notes from Underground is the quintessence of Dostoyevsky's psychological observation, with the least alloy of other literary, social, and philosophical interests, so is Modern Love the quintessence of Meredith's psychological observation, with the least alloy of other interests. And Meredith, I believe, like Dostoyevsky, must stand as one of the four or five figures in any realm of literary endeavor, who strikingly and substantially prefigured modern psychological theory, a half-century, as Miss Monroe notes, before Freud and the other psychologists.

I shall have more to say about the psychological significance of Modern Love, especially in terms of its technique of presentation, later in this conclusion, but for the time being I must move on to other considerations.

Perhaps those attributes of Modern Love which have been most frequently praised are its metaphorical power and its pictorial intensity. Over and over such words as "majesty," "magnificence," and "mastery" occur in reference to the imagery of Modern Love, and a not infrequent comparison is to the imagery of Shakespeare. Thus, Trevelyan speaks of "the majestic heights of poetry," and apologizes that "broken quotations can give little idea of the splendor and the art of this poem."¹⁷ Kelvin, in reference to particular passages, speaks of "precise and brilliant imagery" and, again, of "inspired images"; Peel speaks of "haunting images"; Chambers, of "majestic poetry" and "magnificent evolution"; and Priestley, of a "bold

¹⁷Trevelyan, Poetry and Philosophy, pp. 21 and 34.

use of metaphor."¹⁸ Day Lewis speaks of "the magnificence of its images"; and John Bailey writes that "in poetry as in prose, Meredith was a born maker of memorable phrases"--Modern Love being, in Bailey's words, the "supreme exhibition of this gift."¹⁹ In fuller descriptions, Basil de Sélincourt, quoting from Stanza XLIII, writes

Passages like this--Modern Love is full of them--show a mastery which staggers praise It is certainly not the least merit of passages like these that they seem to renew the vitality, to enhance the dignity, of the language in which they are written.²⁰

And M. Sturge Henderson proposes that in Meredith

we are confronted with a writer whose generalizations are as vivid and pictorial as his instances. The humblest writer in attempting to reveal his convictions to other minds, realizes that in proportion as he penetrates caverns or recesses of thought he must set torches of metaphor to light the obscurity of unaccustomed paths. With Meredith the pathway is aflame; his metaphor is so vivid, so constant, as to seem the thought itself. . . .

Throughout, the poem is distinguished by greatness of metaphor, sustained and exalted till in the last quatrain perhaps its highest significance is reached.²¹

For Siegfried Sassoon, Modern Love "contains many lines which might be mistaken for familiar quotations from Shakespeare's plays."²² And

¹⁸Kelvin, pp. 29 and 34; Peel, p. 31; Chambers, pp. 83 and 85; and Priestley, p. 109.

¹⁹Day Lewis, "Introduction," p. vii; and John Bailey, "The Poetry of George Meredith," Fortnightly Review, July, 1909, p. 43.

²⁰Henderson, George Meredith: Novelist, Poet, Reformer, p. 241 [As indicated in an earlier footnote, four chapters on Meredith's poetry in this book were supplied by de Sélincourt--the present quotation being taken from one of these chapters].

²¹"Some Thoughts Underlying George Meredith's Poems," International Journal of Ethics, April, 1906, p. 341 [This is an earlier article by Mrs. Henderson, who herself wrote the lengthy analysis of Modern Love in the above book, though not the chapters on Meredith's poetry in general].

²²Sassoon, p. 52.

John Bailey, Richard Le Gallienne, and Sir W. B. Thomas also make direct or implied comparisons to the imagery of Shakespeare.²³ It is perhaps to such comparisons as theirs that Day Lewis refers when he writes:

Several critics have said that Meredith, in the emotional richness and intellectual sweep of his imagery at its best, comes nearer than any other English poet to Shakespeare. Certainly there are images in Modern Love which fasten upon the memory as Shakespeare's do, and lines which strike the ear with the same majestic resonance. Meredith is also comparable with Shakespeare in his power to transubstantiate the commonplace. Although his later poetry is full of brainwork--too full, we may think . . . --Modern Love strikes us as the poem in which heart and mind are most at one. Here passion is leavened with intelligence, intelligence steeped in the blood of a full-grown experience. And the result is a poetry of true wisdom, wisdom that speaks out, as Shakespeare's did, in great, flashing, transfigured platitudes.

[Here Day Lewis quotes from Stanza IV]

It is not originality, still less idiosyncrasy of thought, which renders this passage memorable. It is a commonplace, whose force we are at last made to feel, through and through, by the inner conviction and the expressive grandeur of its utterance.²⁴

So intensely vivid is the imagery of Modern Love that a number of critics have themselves felt called upon to find images and metaphors with which to describe it. I have already quoted Mrs. Henderson's expression of a "pathway . . . aflame [with] metaphor," and a more frequent comparison is to acid etchings and other of the pictorial arts. Thus, Mrs. Henderson herself elsewhere speaks of "phrase after phrase etched as with acid on the plate of memory";²⁵ and Arthur Symonds speaks of "scraps of broken, of heartbroken, talk . . . burning into one like the touch of

²³John Bailey, p. 42; Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics, p. 120; and Thomas, "George Meredith," H. J. Massingham and Hugh Massingham, eds., The Great Victorians (London, 1932), p. 305.

²⁴Day Lewis, "Introduction," pp. xxv-xxvi.

²⁵Henderson, "Some Thoughts Underlying George Meredith's Poems," p. 341.

a corroding acid."²⁶ For Cavazza, "the sonnets . . . are like so many pictures by a master of the impressionist school";²⁷ Le Gallienne speaks of a particular image combination (in Stanza XXIX) as being "as fearful as Holbein";²⁸ and James Thomson characterizes the whole poem as "a series of Rembrandt etchings for sombre intensity and concision."²⁹

In my own study, I have been most concerned with calling attention to and clarifying the intricate cross-relationships between images and the several levels of suggestion of individual images among the various image patterns of Modern Love, but certainly its metaphors are powerfully evocative and suggestive even when perceived in relatively less studied readings. I know, indeed, of no other poem of comparable length in the entire range of Victorian Literature which exhibits a more intense, sustained, and concentrated brilliance of metaphor than does Modern Love.

And yet, despite its primary position among Meredith's own poems, and despite the great amount of praise that has been afforded it in an absolute sense, Modern Love has never been very meaningfully ranked, as it seems to me, among the other major poetic works of the Victorian Period. Such ranking as it has achieved has been, indeed, almost entirely as a sonnet sequence, a genre into which it fits only awkwardly and at the expense of its more significant merits as a continuous narrative-dramatic work.

²⁶Symons, "George Meredith as Poet," p. 49.

²⁷Cavazza, p. V.

²⁸Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics, p. 120.

²⁹Thomson's characterization of the poem is reported by Jerrold, p. 47, and by E. J. Bailey, p. 249.

With an unorthodox, non-complex rhyme structure which affords no inherent sense of completion within the individual sections, and one which--as I have shown--Meredith intentionally molds and manipulates by syntactical devices to avoid a sense of completion, Modern Love might, in fact, be expected to stand at a disadvantage among orthodox sonnet sequences with their more complex rhyme schemes and their inherent sense of completion. That Modern Love has apparently not suffered from the disadvantage, but has instead been frequently ranked along with the three greatest sonnet sequences of the language, is itself, I think, an indication of its very great metaphorical power, as well as of its intensity of mood and emotion.

The three sequences with which it is frequently compared are of course Shakespeare's Sonnets, Rossetti's The House of Life, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning's Sonnets from the Portuguese. Both Stevenson and Jerrold rank it as one of the 'great sonnet sequences';³⁰ Trevelyan and Jerrold compare it specifically with Rossetti's The House of Life;³¹ Walker compares it with both Rossetti's work and Mrs. Browning's;³² Sassoon, Le Gallienne, E. J. Bailey, and Weygandt compare it with the Sonnets of Shakespeare;³³ and Le Gallienne and Bailey compare it with all three.³⁴

³⁰Stevenson, The Ordeal of George Meredith, p. 103; and Jerrold, p. 47.

³¹Trevelyan, Poetry and Philosophy, pp. 19-20; and Jerrold, p. 53.

³²Walker, p. 781.

³³Sassoon, p. 52; Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics, p. 132; E. J. Bailey, p. 252; and Weygandt, p. 181.

³⁴Le Gallienne, Ibid., pp. 131-132; and E. J. Bailey, pp. 253-254.

As this would indicate, the most frequent comparison is with Shakespeare's Sonnets. For Bailey, Modern Love has "much in common" with Shakespeare: "Like his Elizabethan master," according to Bailey, "Mr. Meredith presents the many moods of a single man, while his Victorian contemporaries content themselves with the many phases of a single mood."³⁵ For Le Gallienne, too, it is "the one poem of closest kin to Shakespeare's sonnets," the Shakespearean qualities specifically cited by Le Gallienne being the "space and might of [his] imagination"--as opposed to Rossetti's "highly wrought fancy."³⁶ For Weygandt, Modern Love is "as great as any series of sonnets in our tongue save Shakespeare's"; and Sassoon, too, is "tempted to rank it second to the Sonnets of Shakespeare."³⁷

Although I would agree that Modern Love, in its metaphorical power and emotional variety, is closer to Shakespeare's Sonnets than to the other two major sequences, and although I would, in a broad sense, rank it among the great sonnet sequences of the language, I do not think that comparisons to the sonnet sequences are very productive--but that they tend instead to mislead one as to the value of the poem as a continuous narrative. Such comparisons may indeed contribute to the all too frequent practice of anthologizing the poem only in part.

Modern Love has also been occasionally--but only very occasionally--compared to such narrative, or semi-narrative, works as Tennyson's Maud, Patmore's The Angel in the House, and Robert Browning's James Lee's Wife.

³⁵E. J. Bailey, pp. 253-254.

³⁶Le Gallienne, George Meredith: Some Characteristics, pp. 131-132.

³⁷Weygandt, p. 181; and Sassoon, p. 52.

And here I think we are moving in a more productive direction. Such works share with Modern Love not only a basic narrative or at least semi-narrative form, but also a large tendency to lyric expression, and at least some interest in the psychological. Also, all deal with love relationships, and all are set in the contemporary period.

Beyond this, however, Patmore's work especially offers little by way of comparison to Modern Love. Not only does it deal with a "happy" love relationship, but as Hough puts it, "Patmore's tea-table pieties, though not unthoughtful or contemptible, never seem to justify their poetic form."³⁸

Browning's James Lee's Wife, on the other hand, though not one of Browning's longer or better known works, does offer the poetic complexity and the basically similar subject matter (the loss of love) to make it a meaningful comparison or, perhaps more accurately, a meaningful contrast to Meredith's poem. Norman Kelvin, in speaking of the use of conflict imagery in Modern Love, points up a significant difference between the two works in that

James Lee's wife, in telling of the decline of her husband's love, in searching for an understanding of him and herself, gives no intimation of conflict. Not only are there no battle images in the poem, but they are unimaginable: the tone and mood of "James Lee" exclude them.

The "transiency of love" in Browning's poem, as Kelvin continues, "is a divine mystery and man must simply acquiesce in it." The "love" itself, in that work, as Kelvin adds,

is a single entity: something to be given or withheld whereas in Meredith's work, love is more complex. It has many pseudonymous forms—lust, false purity, egoism—and these must be discovered

³⁸Hough, p. 6.

and defeated. . . . The central situation in Modern Love is conflict: with oneself and with one's mate. The central situation in "James Lee" is submission to loss, submission made more painful by a vision of what might have been, but submission nevertheless.³⁹

It need hardly be added that just as there is no conflict in James Lee's Wife, so is there no significant dramatic development.

Of all of the three poems Tennyson's Maud provides the most extensive parallels. Not only is it a long narrative poem (at some 1300 lines, it is more than half again as long as Modern Love), but it also reflects in detail the varying psychological states of its protagonist-speaker. In addition, it shares with Modern Love not only a number of "sentimental" love images (e.g., the star, the angel, the rose, the garden), but also a surprising number of morbid, or reversed sentimental, images (e.g., poison-flowers, snare, shipwreck, bat, and darkness). And finally, the protagonist in Maud would be, in Meredithian terms, an extreme "sentimentalist," just as he would be, in modern psychological terms, an extreme neurotic, verging at times on the psychotic.

But the dramatic structure of Maud does not really turn upon the protagonist's psychological states and conceptions; instead the lovers of the poem are separated by political and family conflicts---a Romeo and Juliet archetype, as it were. And perhaps even more significantly, the protagonist does not finally work out his catharsis in terms of his own psychological conceptions, but is instead "awaked, . . . to the better mind" (Part Three, line 56) by an external circumstance, by the call to war. Thus, as Graham Hough very aptly notes, "where Tennyson succeeds in Maud it is by a timeless lyricism quite unrelated to [its] modern

³⁹Kelvin, p. 27.

subject."⁴⁰

Maud's "lyric" achievement is, of course, very great: it is itself a metaphorically rich poem--though it lacks I think the metaphorical complexity of Modern Love--and it is certainly a more graceful poem in many of its parts than is Modern Love. In terms of psychological complexity and of psychological insight, however, it is obvious, I believe, that Modern Love marks a large stride forward from Maud. Also, what is perhaps less obvious, Modern Love marks a considerable step forward in poetic narrative technique. In variety and complexity of point of view and of seasonal structure, for example, it as far exceeds Maud, perhaps, as Maud exceeds it in metrical variety. Although I should not wish to make a total value judgment between the two works, I do think that the comparison between Modern Love and Maud is a productive one, and that more detailed comparisons might be profitable.

Unfortunately, other than Maud and, to a lesser degree, other than Patmore's poem and Browning's James Lee's Wife, there is little else in the Victorian Period with which Modern Love can be very profitably compared. Arthur Symons suggests that the Meredith poem may have exerted some influence on James Thomson's The Story of Weddah and Om-el-Bonain and on W. S. Blunt's The Love Sonnets of Proteus,⁴¹ but neither shares with Modern Love its contemporary milieu and also neither is much read at the present time.

And Harriet Monroe, writing in 1928, suggests that Modern Love may have been "the precursor of a number of twentieth-century narratives of

⁴⁰Hough, p. 6.

⁴¹Symons, "George Meredith's Poetry," pp. 695-696.

passionate clash and strain--Robinson's, for example, and Leonard's."⁴² I can discover, however, no extended work of Robinson's which seems analogous to Modern Love, and William Channery Leonard's Two Lives seems hardly worthy of the comparison. The twentieth-century trend has been, in fact, away from long narrative poems of any kind--their previous functions being largely absorbed by the novel, the drama, and the short story.

I should say, indeed, that Modern Love has suffered, perhaps greatly, in its over-all literary reputation by the very lack of major poetic works with which it can be meaningfully compared--that it stands largely by itself as a literary type. Should a revival of the extended narrative-dramatic poem occur, however, I believe that Modern Love, properly understood and widely discussed, might yet exert an important influence. I believe, indeed, that Meredith, in the peculiar technical construction of Modern Love achieves certain significant effects not available thus far even in the generally more flexible forms of the novel, the drama, or the short story.

I have previously spoken of the modern viability of the psychological insights and conceptions reflected in Modern Love. I have, in fact, indicated at one time or another that Meredith's poetry seems to reflect conceptions analogous to the modern conceptions of neurosis (and partially of psychosis), of the subconscious, of the repression of hostility, of the projection of impulses and conceptions onto the external world, and of the tripartite division of the personality into id, ego, and superego. But much more important than the fact that Meredith seems to have had

⁴²Monroe, p. 211.

counterparts for such conceptions a half century before they were "scientifically" formulated by Freud and the other psychologists is the fact that Meredith found means directly to dramatize the intricate dynamics of such elements and functions of the personality: that he found lyric and dramatic means to illustrate the interactions of Blood (id) impulses and Spirit (superego) impulses--the former frequently wearing the guise of the latter; that he found means to show the Brain (the conscious personality or ego) as not fully aware of the existence or significance or either; that he also found means to illustrate the projection of the resulting confused patterns of impulses onto the external world itself; that he was able to show whole states of mind rapidly reversing themselves, each becoming its opposite; and that he was able to trace the dynamics of one entire sentimental (neurotic-psychotic) personality through to its tragic self-destruction in terms of itself, and that he was able to trace the dynamics of another entire sentimental (neurotic) personality through to a catharsis, again in terms of itself.

It is such effects as these which I think are not entirely available to either the short story, the novel, or the drama, at least as we now know them. They demand, on the one hand, a "lyric-dramatic" presentation--that is, a presentation of unspoken, and frequently subconscious, conceptions, evoked by, and in the framework of, a movement of events--this not available to visual and spoken drama as we know it; and they demand, on the other hand, a reliance on metaphor and symbol interwoven and overlapped with a kind of simultaneous complexity again not readily available to the discursive and descriptive forms of either the novel or the short story as we now know them.

In speaking of Meredith's achievement in dramatizing the dynamics of specific psychological functions such as the above, I do not mean to imply that this is the whole achievement of the poem. In the main, this is the achievement of what I have called the "controlling" level of meaning. Men are themselves, I think, "controlled" by their partial and warring impulses from time to time, and yet they may also at any moment (and seemingly simultaneously with the other) "feel" their experience with their whole personality. And this additional richness and variety of "feeling," this "ambiguity" of life itself, Meredith is also able to evoke throughout Modern Love by perhaps more traditional uses of metaphor and dramatic movement, to whose power and variety we have already attested.

Much of the achievement of Modern Love is in the great tradition of English poetry, but within this tradition Meredith also devised essentially new techniques for clarifying certain complexities of experience not previously clarified in literary form, and still not fully appreciated. Arthur Symonds, himself writing in 1887, said of Modern Love:

Mr. Meredith has never done anything else like it; this wonderful style, acid, stinging, bitter-sweet, poignant, as if fashioned of the very moods of these "modern lovers," reappears in no other poem (except faintly in the "Ballad of Fair Ladies in Revolt"). The poem stands alone, not merely in Mr. Meredith's work, but in all antecedent literature. It is altogether a new thing; we venture to call it the most "modern" poem we have.⁴³

In many significant ways, Modern Love is still, I believe, "the most 'modern' poem we have."

⁴³"George Meredith's Poetry," p. 696.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Willie Duane Reader was born August 1, 1931, in Aledo, Texas. After graduating from the San Angelo High School, San Angelo, Texas, in 1948, he attended San Angelo Junior College two years and Baylor University one year. From 1953 until 1955 he served in the Engineering Corps of the United States Army and was stationed in Colorado. Following his discharge from the army, he entered the University of Texas, where he received the degree of Bachelor of Arts in May, 1958. In June, 1958, he entered the Graduate School of the University of Texas, where he received the degree of Master of Arts in January, 1960. From September, 1959 through May, 1960, he was employed as an Instructor in the Department of English at Hardin-Simmons University. In June, 1960, he entered the Graduate School of the University of Florida where he was awarded a fellowship which he held through the summer of 1962. During this time he pursued work toward the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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This dissertation was prepared under the direction of the chairman of the candidate's supervisory committee and has been approved by all members of that committee. It was submitted to the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and to the Graduate Council, and was approved as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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